Kino no Tabi Volume5

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 5

キノの旅(たび) V

the Beautiful World

そう――。
この世界は美しく、そして輝いている。
ボクの心を落ち着かせ、なごませてくれる。辛いことを忘れさせてくれる。それが、ボクの心がおかしくて、狂っていて、壊れていることの証明だとしても……。
それでもボクは、そう思えることを幸せに思う。思える今を大切に思う。
さあ――。
ボクはこれからもこれを見続けよう。ボク以外の世界中の人が、これを美しくないと吐き捨てても。そう思うことが、これ以上ないほどの間違いだとしても。
ボクが、これを美しいと思うかぎり。

人間キノと言葉を話す二輪車エルメスの旅の話。短編連作の形で綴られる、大人気新感覚ノベル第５弾!!

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時雨沢恵一
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しぐさわけいいち
時雨沢恵一

1972 年に生まれ。1969 年に生まれて、1974 年にも生まれる。1987 年に生まれたこともあったが、1999 年に生まれ、1765年に生まれる。そして実は1945年生まれ。この欄は実は作者が書く。ここに何が書いてあっても、そう――信じちゃいけない。決して。

【電撃文庫作品】

キノの旅　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅱ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅲ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅳ　the Beautiful World
キノの旅Ⅴ　the Beautiful World

くろぼしこうはく
イラスト:黒星紅白

1974年生まれ。性別：男。九州在住。プレイステーションソフト「サモンナイト」のキャラクターデザインを手がける。フリーでも色々やっています。趣味：プラモデル買い、釣り。

カバー/旭印刷

キノの旅V

— the Beautiful World —

時雨沢 恵一
KEIICHI SIGSAWA
イラスト：黒星紅白
ILLUSTRATION：KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

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カバー・口絵・本文デザイン／鎌部善彦

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You think it is beautiful because you believe that it is

— Have I Ever Seen the Beautiful World? —

“Amidst the Setting Sun · b” — Will b —

Prologue

“Amidst the Setting Sun · b”

— Will · b —

Ah.

Despite what everybody says, I find this place truly beautiful.

While everybody says this place is tedious, I always thought this place refreshing.

I remember not being able to even think when I first saw this place, so captivated by its beauty.

No matter how many times I observe it I can’t even fathom its incredible beauty.

I wish nothing but to be able to watch this place every day.

However.

It seems that I am the only one who thinks this way.

Is there something wrong with me?

Am I insane?

Yes.

This world is shining with a lovely light.

It calms me down, it consoles me. It helps me with forgetting my sorrows.

Whether it’s evidence of my insanity, my madness or my lunacy, I am filled with bliss over the mere fact that I can see beauty in this world.

I am ecstatic of the fact that I can think like this, in this moment.

Ah.

I will always observe this world.

Even if everybody else curses this world’s ugliness.

As long as I find this world beautiful, even if the mere fact of my finding beauty in this world is a sin, I will always be looking at it.

—

“Come on Will, let’s get some grub.”

“Yeah, I’m coming.”

I can’t let my precious comrades wait any longer.

I descended through the ladder after saluting to the beautiful world once more.

“Reminiscence”[1] — Blue Rose —

Chapter One

"Reminiscence"

— Blue Rose —

"Okay! I have a good idea. Take me with you. I wanna travel too," the child said.

The traveler with the short black hair, and the motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) beside her, upon hearing this, fell to an awkward silence.

It was a pretty looking garden that seemed to be taken with great care. Beautiful red and blue roses blossomed all around, and there was also a marble fountain.

"Great idea, huh? I've been thinking about what you said. I'll be able to look at a lot of other countries. Oh, and I'll be able to study a lot too, right? So take me with you," the child said with an ecstatic expression on his face.

The traveler who was telling stories about her travels upon the child's request, made an awkward expression.

"I apologize, but I won't be able to fulfill that wish."

"Uh-huh, no way," added the motorrad, and the child spoke in a loud voice.

“Why! How come miss traveler is able to travel, but I’m not to?”

He turned to face the old man on his side.

“I can go, right?”

The old man made an awkward expression, but firmly said.

“No, that’s impossible.”

“Why? Are you saying you won’t follow my orders? Is that what you’re trying to say? Huh? Huh?”

The child held onto the man and shouted this as if he was attacking him.

Seeing the man’s embarrassed expression, the traveler got up from her seat, and held on to the motorrad’s handlebars to push it.

“If you’ll excuse me.”

The child held onto the traveler after wobbling towards her.

"Why?! Tell me why!!"

The traveler looked down towards the child and answered,

"Traveling is very dangerous."

"Yeah, and there's no room for you to sit down, you know," the motorrad chimed in.

After she bade the old man farewell, the traveler started to leave, pushing the motorrad with her. The child screamed desperately while pursuing the traveler.

"Take me with you! I'll do anything you say! I'll even eat my carrots! I'll behave! I won't even say that I can't sleep without mom! So please, take me!"

After telling the child not to follow her one last time, the traveler left, ignoring the child's frantic cries.

As the traveler disappeared with the noise of the motorrad's engine, the child cried and wailed loudly.

It was a pretty looking garden that seemed to be taken with great care. Some beautiful red and blue roses blossomed all around, and there was also a marble fountain.

The child buried his face into the arms of the old man who knelt next to him.

And he cried. He cried and cried.

—

The old man who aged even more greatly than before waked the child who was now a young man.

The child who was now a young man had fallen asleep in a chair in a luxurious office. After the young man thanked the old man, he told him about the dream he just had.

“Sorry for being a pain in the neck.”

And he told the old man that he still remembered that day clearly, and apologized to the old man in a gentle voice.

The old man quietly smiled and bowed respectfully to his king.

“Land of Permitted Murder” — Jungle’s Rule —

Chapter Two

"Land of Permitted Murder"

— Jungle's Rule —

There was a prairie and a lake.

The flat earth was covered in grass and trees as far as the eye could see. Clear water from underground bubbled out to fill small ditches, forming several small ponds.

The bright summer sun illuminated the vegetation on the ground and in the water. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. The blue, dry atmosphere extended everywhere.

There was one way through the prairie.

It was a narrow road, and judging from the grass growing on it, it didn’t seem to have seen much traffic. Avoiding the lake, the road extended roughly from east to west.

One motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle) was running west down the road, fully loaded with travel luggage on its back, both sides, and on top. A silver cup strapped to the side of the bag was rattling as the motorrad sped along the path.

The rider was wearing a white shirt under an open black vest. Around her waist was fastened a thick belt

with a hand persuader (Note: A gun) holster on her right thigh and a slender automatic one holstered against her lower back.

The rider wore a brimmed hat with goggles over her black hair. Under the hat was the rider's young face. She seemed to be in her mid-teens.

"There's a horse. See it, Kino?" the motorrad said suddenly while riding.

Kino, the rider, narrowed her eyes under her goggles at the road ahead.

"Yeah, I see it. Looks like someone's there."

Kino released the handle with her left hand to check the persuader against her back and then the revolver at her thigh with her right hand.

"I'm stopping, Hermes."

On the side of the road was a horse, laden with luggage, drinking from the lake. Near it was a man with a hat over his face, sleeping on his back. The sound of the motorrad’s engine woke him.

The young man, who appeared to be in his twenties, wore riding pants and boots, a thin jacket, and a hand persuader holster on his right hip containing a .45 caliber automatic.

The man waved to the approaching motorrad.

—

“Hey,” he called out to Kino as she brought the motorrad to a stop.

Kino got off the motorrad and put down the kickstand, leaving the engine running.

“Hello.”

"Howdy."

Kino and Hermes, her motorrad, greeted him.

"Are you from the country up ahead?" the man asked.

"No. We're on our way there now," Kino replied.

"Great, I was just on my way there myself. How about going together? That way you could take half my load for me. It oughta be light for a motorrad," asked the man matter-of-factly.

"I can't do that," replied Kino, just as straightly, with Hermes chiming in with agreement.

The man frowned, openly showing his annoyance, " Well aren't you a cold one. You can't even do that simple thing?"

"That's right," Kino answered with a polite smile. "If I did that, I could just take all your stuff and run. Then I'd get there first and sell it all."

Kino turned away in disinterest and the man tut-tutted in disapproval.

“Well, that’s alright… But by the way!” The man looked at Kino as if staring right into her. “Do you know about that country? Have you heard what kind of country it is?” the man asked.

“I don’t know any details, but I’ve heard that it’s a very gentlemanly country,” replied Kino.

The man burst into laughter and said with a smirk, “ Who told you that?! That’s completely wrong!”

“What did you hear?”

The man laughed again. “Heh heh heh. Guess it can’t be helped. I’ll enlighten ya, since it’s so amusing. About that country… they call it the ‘Land of Permitted Murder ’.”

“Sorry, what was that?” Hermes asked.

“By law, murder isn’t prohibited. You can’t steal, but hurting and killing people and every other crime like that isn’t prosecuted. It’s like it’s the murdered person’s fault more than the murderer’s. It’s a jungle in there, just inside the walls. It’s a pretty well known story,” said the man, who seemed to be enjoying himself.

“And you want to go there then?” Kino asked.

“Yeah, of course. I’ll live there. My home country has ludicrously good security and everyone’s on stupidly good terms with each other. I absolutely despised it. It was always ‘laws, laws, laws’ there, so did ‘em a favor and ditched the place.”

“So, how do you become a citizen of this other country ?” asked Hermes.

“I dunno… at this point I’ll just live there and see how it goes.” The man paused, “If there’s a guy I don’t like, I’ ll beat him to death. Seems like a good place for someone like me,” he said, acting cool.

“Hmm… That doesn’t sound very interesting to me,” Hermes replied. The man looked offended.

“Well besides that, there’s someone I look up to in that country. Maybe you guys have heard of him? That ‘Mr. Legal’[2].”

“No.” “Don’t know him.” Kino and Hermes said shortly.

"I guess you guys really are from out of town." The man paused in amazement for a moment and then started to gladly and quickly explain. "That 'Mr. Legal', he's from a big country to the south where he's the leader of a band of robbers and terrorists and is a well-known serial killer. He accidentally got himself caught, but was such a tough guy that he escaped just before the hanging and fled the country. That's already decades in the past, but he still hasn't been caught so it's almost certainly like they say, that in the end, murderers end up in that country. They say assassins and killers from all over the world gather in that country. So surely he'd be free to kill as much as he wants. I really look up to him and would love to meet him. I wish I could tell you even more!"

"I see. Well, with that we'll be off then," Kino said, climbing back onto Hermes.

"You're a boring one… Hey," the man called out to stop Kino, glaring at her. "You really can't carry anything for me?"

"Yes, please carry your own travel luggage," said Kino , as though stating the obvious, and immediately started up Hermes.

The man was left surrounded in the roar of the engine.

He looked over his shoulder as they drove off. "Fine. I swear, if I see them again inside that country…," he muttered to himself and laughed.

—

Walls connected to the lake with aqueducts and canals that had been dug outside. The white stone walls towered tall above them.

It was evening when Kino and Hermes arrived near the gate. As soon as they arrived, the bridge over the canal slowly lowered down.

"So, a country where they don't prohibit murder… I bet there'll be some amazing things in there," Hermes said, seemingly enjoying himself.

"Probably so."

"You ready?"

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“You don’t need to do any preparations for your persuader?”

“I always do them, so it’ll be fine. Now then, shall we go?” Kino replied and started crossing the bridge.

—

“Do you wish to immigrate? Or are you traveling and wish to stay for a short time?” an immigration officer inquired to Kino from inside a small guardroom outside the gate.

Kino told him that they were the latter and would like to stay for three days.

“Are you aware that this country does not legally prohibit murder? Regardless of whether you are a citizen or a traveler, within this country, killing for any reason will not be considered a crime. Do you understand?” the immigration asked as a precaution.

Kino nodded.

“Knowing this, you still wish to enter the country?” the immigration inspector asked again.

—

“Strange country, isn’t it?” Kino said while taking down the luggage from Hermes.

Inside the hotel room, there was a simple chair and bed, as well as a lamp and fan placed along the wall. In the corner was a fireplace, sealed shut so it could not be used.

“You think so? I was thinking that it was pretty normal,” Hermes replied, propped up on his center stand in the corner of the room.

“That’s what I mean. And besides that, the town is beautiful and even in the evening there are a lot of people out walking around. The people aren’t nervous

and there don’t appear to be many police officers in town . The stores didn’t have any sturdy shutters either. And they’re kind to travelers as well.”

After passing through the city walls, Kino and Hermes had ridden for a while through farmland. When they asked directions to a hotel in town, the people nearby gathered and had happily shown them the way.

Hermes asked, “In other words?”

“What I’m saying is that the public order here is very good, and that’s what’s strange,” Kino replied.

“Ah, I see. Since murder isn’t legally prohibited, were you hoping for gangs of ruffians strutting around, women fighting in bars, and dogs trotting around biting people’s hands? That’s too bad,” said Hermes.

“Well, I wouldn’t really say I was hoping for it…”

Kino unloaded her luggage next to the bed, took off her holster and vest, and removed the revolver called ‘ Canon’ from her right thigh.

“Or perhaps…” Kino murmured to herself while she looked at the Canon’s black luster.

"Perhaps what?" asked Hermes.

"Well, whatever. You might understand eventually." Without saying a word more, Kino laid down on the bed with Canon still resting on her chest.

"What's that? … I guess there's no point in asking any more. Goodnight."

—

The next morning, Kino woke at dawn as always.

She opened the window and shutters. A quiet street and a clear blue sky with thin streaks of clouds stretched out before her eyes.

Kino warmed up with some light exercises, then began training with her Canon and Woodsman, the automatic she kept on her back. She repeatedly practiced her quick draw, rapidly pulling each gun from its holster to a firing position. Afterwards, she disassembled the guns and

cleaned them before returning them and the cleaning oil to their holsters.

After taking a shower, Kino got some breakfast from the hotel. With the sun risen, she tapped Hermes awake and left the hotel.

The town was lined with old stone buildings. Along both sides of what seemed to be the main street were shops, the upper floors of which had apartments.

Kino went into a store and sold the things she didn’t need as well as other sellable items from her travels, then bought the things she needed. Once the good-hearted, middle-aged shopkeeper learned that Kino was a traveler , he gave her a bargain.

Behind his chair, a long rifle-type persuader was propped up. Kino asked whether it was for defending against robberies, but the shopkeeper shook his head.

“We’ve never had a robber in this store or the neighboring stores. This,” the shopkeeper answered, “is for killing people.”

“Hmm… When?” Hermes asked.

"Hm? Who knows when… I know the sort of situations, but I don't know when they'll arise, so I always just keep it around," the shopkeeper replied with a laugh.

"I see," Kino murmured quietly.

—

After they had finished shopping, Kino and Hermes rode around to see the country. The country was not very big and by the afternoon they had finished their tour and returned to the main street.

They found a restaurant with tables alongside the street and Kino took a seat, with Hermes behind her chair. A cool breeze passed through in the shade.

Kino asked the waiter if they had anything sweet and was told that there was the recommended special. Without really knowing what it was, she ordered it.

"Here you are. Please take your time."

“……”

What came out was a cream crepe of tremendous size, piled up like a mountain on a huge plate.

“……”

“Kino?”

“Everything’s a challenge.”

Kino attacked it with a knife, chopping it up roughly until, after some time, she had eaten all of it. Hermes just watched in amazement.

A short while after she finished eating, a number of elderly people came and sat down in a group around Kino.

Having found Kino, an elderly lady from among them asked, “Hey, are you the traveler?”

Kino said yes and the old woman said that they had just finished their hobby of dancing and that they always came to that shop to eat afterwards, so naturally they came today too, and continued on about things that Kino didn’t particularly ask about.

"So traveler, don't you think this country has very good public order?" the old woman asked.

"Yes, it's very good," Kino said honestly.

A man in the group with a cane and a long white beard asked Kino, "Where are you heading?"

"I don't know," Kino answered.

"Well then, do you know, mister motorrad?" the old man asked.

"You kidding?" Hermes replied, the pitch of his voice rising at the end.

"Hm… Well then, how about moving to this country?" said the old man.

"Yes, that's a great idea! Why don't you do that? We'll help you out and can find a place for you to live as early as tomorrow, then it's just a simple matter of procedure down at the town hall, you'll just need to sign your name on the paper and then—"

Then, softly ignoring the old woman who was talking as fast and loudly as a machine gun, the old man said to Kino, "How about it? I think this country would be well-suited for a person like you."

"What kind of person is that?" Hermes asked from behind the chair.

The bearded old man answered with a smile, "A person who can kill people."

"……"

Kino paused for a while and then shook her head.

"Is that so? That's too bad… But I hope you'll have a relaxing stay. Traveling is dangerous business, so hopefully being here a bit will put your mind at ease."

"Thank you. I'll take you up on that."

"I wonder what you'd think of this country's sweets? They're really quite nice; I think they'd make a good souvenir for your travels. Then we could talk a little

about matters outside the city walls instead,” the old man suggested. Kino shook her head with a chagrined face.

Hermes explained, “Sorry, she just finished stuffing herself with those sweets.”

“Ah, is that right? Well then, how about tea tomorrow morning?”

—

The next day. Specifically, it was the morning of the third day since Kino had entered the country.

Kino got up at dawn. She did her light exercises and persuader training, took a shower as though reluctant to part with it, and had breakfast.

She arranged the luggage and piled it up on Hermes, securely fixing it to him.

She tapped Hermes awake and headed out to the restaurant on the street. The bearded old man from the day before was leisurely drinking tea. Kino was stopped by the old man and they talked about the state of the neighboring countries. The old man squinted his eyes and seemed to greatly enjoy listening. Then he treated Kino to tea and dessert and the two of them divided up the mountain of it and ate it together.

"I'm afraid we'll have to be going soon," said Kino as the restaurant began to get crowded with the noon rush.

"Is that so… Well, thank you, I honestly enjoyed our time," the old man said politely with a bow, which Kino reciprocated.

Kino pushed Hermes back out to the street. She started the engine and the sound echoed out, somewhat disrupting the quiet of the town.

On the street, Kino nodded to the old man with the cane just as she put Hermes into gear.

"You!! I found ya! Stop right there!" shouted a loud voice. "It's you! You on the motorrad with the black vest! "

The man Kino had seen outside the country two days before came screaming out of a building. Kino cut Hermes' engine. The street became quiet.

"This place is just perfect. Don't move!"

All the people in the area were paying close attention to the man. He approached Kino, who got off Hermes and kicked down his side stand.

"What is it?" Kino asked, standing in front of Hermes.

"The luggage you've got on your motorrad, put it all on the ground!" said the man, who stood a short distance away.

"May I ask what for?"

"I'll take it for ya. It must be pretty heavy, right? So I'll help ya lessen the weight. I'll take it all, use what I can use, sell what I don't need, and use it for my living expenses. Sounds like a plan?"

"I understand, but I couldn't possibly trouble you so much. I refuse," Kino said.

The man cackled and added, "If you refuse, I'll kill you here and now. I'll ask again. If you value your life, leave your luggage and go. Don't worry, I'm not gonna take your clothes off or anything. How about it?"

The man glanced to the holster on his right hip, where a loaded hand persuader could be seen.

The people who were in the street started pulling away into buildings.

"So you immigrated then, huh?" Kino said.

"Of course! I'm now a citizen of this country."

"But you don't act like one," said Kino.

The man frowned.

"Huh…? That stuff doesn't matter. What's your reply?"

Kino looked to her left and right. No one was in the streets, but she could see shadows in the second floor windows of the buildings.

"We refuse. Since we're already leaving the country."

"I guess there's no more negotiating then…"

The man spread his feet shoulder-width apart and shook out his hands and shoulders.

"Hermes… Sorry but, could you give me a sec?" Kino said quietly.

"Understood. Just patch up the holes afterward, alright?" Hermes replied.

The man pulled out his persuader from his waist. Kino reacted quickly and twirled out of the way.

"?"

She took cover, crouching behind Hermes.

"… Huh? What are you doing? Coward! You didn't even draw?! Is that thing on your waist just for decoration?" the man howled, thrusting his persuader forward with his right hand and taking a step closer to Hermes.

"Don't take it personally." The moment he said it, an arrow came flying at an angle from above, hitting his right arm.

The persuader fell. The man looked at his arm. Where the arrow pierced his arm, blood flowed and dripped.

"Uwah—!"

Just as he cried out in pain, another arrow came flying and hit the inside of his left foot, piercing his boot and pinning it to the ground.

"Gyah—!" The man was in agony. He couldn't remove the arrows from his foot or his arm.

"OWWWWCH—!! Dammit! Damn it!!"

The townspeople gathered quietly around the screaming man. Everyone's face was calm, and they were all holding some sort of weapon. A man holding a big knife. A youth readying a persuader. A young woman holding a club. A woman came out from an apartment with a crossbow.

Kino looked out at the scene, peeking out half of her face from behind Hermes' tank.

"Hey! The hell'd you do that for?! Damn it hurts…"

The old man with the cane approached the man and spoke.

"It's no good… You can't do that. That's why we stopped you."

"W-What…? Damn it! Hurry up and take these out, will ya?!"

"I'll answer your question," the old man said quietly. " Here, in this country… The act of killing people is not allowed."

The man glared at the elderly man.

"What? You liar! This is the country where murder isn' t prohibited! That's why I bothered to come here in the first place!"

"You're right. You aren't mistaken about that. That's why we're here." The surrounding people chimed in calmly with agreement.

"W-What are you saying? What are you talking about? Hey! You bastard! I don't get a thing you're sayin'! Hurry up and take out these arrows! I'll beat ya to death! "

"I can't do that. In this country, people who have killed others, people who have tried to kill others, and people who try to kill others, all of them have ended up being killed themselves."

"So why then?! Murder's not illegal, right?! That's why I came! 'Cause you didn't stop murderers!" the man ranted in confusion.

The quiet old man's voice continued, "Saying it's not prohibited doesn't mean that it's allowed."

"… Quit screwing with me! Who the hell do you think you are anyway, *your majesty*?"

The old man narrowed his eyes, which were surrounded by wrinkles.

"Who, me? I'm no one deserving of being called ' majesty'. I'm just one citizen, an old man by the name of Legal."

"Wha…?"

The man looked up at Legal with his mouth hanging open.

"Sorry, but you are dangerous." Legal twisted the handle of his cane and pulled to reveal a sword painted a glossy black. With his weight behind it, he pierced the man's heart with the sword. And then he twisted and pulled it out.

—

The old man with the cane gently closed the eyes of the dead man, and everyone who was there took a moment of silence.

Kino had been watching the scene from behind.

"The death of a fellow man is always a painful thing," someone said, and everyone nodded. Someone requested that arrangements be made for the National Cemetery and someone else took on that responsibility.

Then everyone went their separate ways and returned to where they had been before.

Legal approached Kino and just said, "Take care, alright?"

"Alright," Kino replied and started Hermes' engine. The sound of the engine rang out, somewhat disturbing the quiet of the town.

Kino nodded to the elderly man with the cane from the street and put Hermes into gear.

—

The motorrad rode west along a road between a meadow and a lake. While riding along the edge of the lake, their image was reflected with the sky's on the surface of the lake.

"There's a horse. See it, Kino?" Hermes said suddenly while riding. Kino narrowed her eyes under her goggles at the road ahead.

"Yeah, I see it. Looks like someone's there." Kino released the handle with her left hand to check the persuader against her back and then the revolver at her thigh with her right hand.

"I'm stopping, Hermes."

—

On the side of the road was a horse laden with a large amount of luggage, drinking from the lake. Near it was a man with a hat over his face, sleeping on his back. The sound of the motorrad's engine woke him.

The young man, who appeared to be in his twenties, wore riding pants and boots, a thin jacket, and a hand persuader holster on his right hip containing a .40 caliber automatic.

The man waved to the approaching motorrad.

"Hey," he called out to Kino as she brought the motorrad to a stop.

Kino got off the motorrad and put down the kickstand, leaving the engine running.

"Hello."

"Howdy."

Kino and Hermes greeted him.

"Are you from the country to the east of here?" the man asked, and Kino shook her head.

"No, I'm traveling. I was in that country for three days and I just left a little bit ago."

"Is that so… There's something I'd like to ask but…"

"What might that be?"

The man's face clouded and he said in a serious tone, " I heard from a traveler I met by chance that that country is safe and pleasant, and that it's a gentlemanly place, so that's why I came here." Then he asked, "… is that true?"

"Yes, you're not mistaken," Kino replied and the man' s face relaxed. "But that might depend somewhat on what your feelings are," added Kino.

"My country? Yeah, it was a rough place… Security was the worst. Every day there were multiple murders. I even had to kill and steal from God knows how many people to protect my own life. Even they would've liked to have a normal life… I don't want to kill anyone anymore. So I left that unpleasant country and now I want to live in a safe one."

"I see. In that case, I think you'll definitely like the country up ahead. There's an old man there named Mr. Legal, who it'd be nice if you could visit. If you talk about stories from your travels, I think he'd tell you lots of things too."

"That right? Thanks for the tip," the man said.

After that, Kino asked the man all about the road ahead and the country she was heading to next and the man told her honestly what he knew.

Kino thanked him and made to leave.

"Oh, there was one more thing I wanted to ask…," the man called out and stopped her. "In fact, I heard one strange thing concerning that country when I was in the neighboring country. But could it really be true…? If you happen to know any details…"

"What sort of thing?" Kino asked.

The man hesitated a little and shook his head. "Nah, it's fine. It's so strange, I don't even believe it. It's too disconnected from common sense. It's something I'd find out as soon as I get there anyway, so I'll just find out with my own eyes."

"Is that so… Well then, I think we'll be going now."

"Right, bye then."

The motorrad drove off and the man got on horseback and headed east. While rocking on top of the horse,

"Is it really true…?" he muttered. "That in that country they pile up crepes like mountains."

“Tale of a Store” — For Sale —[3]

Chapter Three

"Tale of a Store"

— For Sale —

STORE JOURNAL VOLUME 25
Written by the store manager

3094th day since grand opening (Sunny)

There were no customers again today.

The customer that came a long time ago left some seeds. The ‘pumpkin’ vegetables that came from the seeds have finally become edible. I tried cutting it up and boiling it while being careful of the thick rind that the customer warned me about.

It tasted sweet and was pretty good. I should try to grow more of them. They seem like they would be good fried as well.

3095th day since grand opening (Sunny, then cloudy)

There were no customers again today.

Without doing anything in particular, I read a book and tended to the store.

I finished reading “The Melancholy of Ulericks”[4].

It was funny.

3096th day since grand opening (Rainy)

There were no customers again today.

The weather was bad all day. I couldn’t do the laundry .

The pumpkin in the pot went bad. It spoils fast.

3097th day since grand opening (Sunny)

There were no customers again today.

The weather cleared up and it was a good day.

I hung the laundry out to dry. I accidentally dropped a shirt and it got covered in mud. Now I’ll have to wash it again.

I thought about putting concrete just under the drying area but I stopped in consideration of the moles and earthworms.

3098th day since grand opening (Sunny)

There were no customers again today.

I did the product inspection as usual. Everything was without problems. Whenever someone does buy something, it’ll work properly. I feel a bit happier.

Afterwards, I resumed reading.

3099th day since grand opening (Cloudy, then sunny)

There were no customers again today.

In the afternoon I hung the ‘Ring bell for service’ sign and went fishing by the river out back.

I caught five fish, some large and some small. I let the small ones go.

For dinner I had meunière for the first time in ages.

3100th day since grand opening (Cloudy)

There were no customers again today.

Something’s been wrong with the power generator since this morning. I fixed it.

I cleaned the store as usual. I always strive for a tidy interior.

I was thinking about smoking the remaining fish, but didn’t since there was only a little left. I ate it for dinner.

3101st day since grand opening (Cloudy)

There were no customers again today.

I did the periodic inspection of my measuring equipment. It had a slight tendency toward lower measurements, but all were within the acceptable margin of error. I’ll re-examine them in another 40 days.

I unpacked one cut of meat from the freezer.

3102nd day since grand opening (Sunny)

A customer came today. It’s the first time in 79 days. For the first time in a long time, I’ll have a long journal entry.

The weather was very good since the morning.

With high spirits, I hung out the sheets to dry and opened the store.

Now that I think about it, I had a feeling that maybe someone would come today, or something like that.

—

Since I had that feeling, I thought I might have something like a sixth sense. I thought I might try to measure it this time.

When the customer came, it was shortly before noon.

Just as I was wondering what to have for lunch, I heard the sound of an engine coming closer so I hurried outside.

The customer was a young traveler on a motorrad who happened to be passing by the store when I called out to stop them in a loud voice and, showing interest, they stopped.

I thought it was rare to travel using a motorrad. At that time, I was thinking how easier it was to fly using a bike, but now that I think about it again, an amateur wouldn’t be able to do anything if the lifter overheats even once, and so using a motorrad to run through the surface would be more reliable after all. [5]

The traveler introduced herself as Kino.

Miss Kino wore a white shirt under a black vest.

I have an interest in clothing so I asked about hers. Her vest was a jacket with removable sleeves that she said she removed when it was hot or put on when it was cold.

‘I see,’ I thought, impressed. On a journey, one has to keep his belongings to a minimum.

—

After a moment, I ushered Miss Kino and Hermes, the motorrad into the store.

Miss Kino took a seat and I served her some tea.

As expected of a traveler, she was careful to inquire as to the contents of the tea before drinking any.

I drank some first to prove its safety.

Miss Kino apologized for being impolite, but I told her not to worry about it. I’ve often heard rumors of robbers who put coma-inducing drugs into tea, so I think it’s good to be careful.

“I humbly welcome you to my store,” I thanked them sincerely.

Then I asked them if I could start explaining about my main products.

"Before that, would you mind me asking a few questions about your store?" Miss Kino said. I was pleased to see that she had an interest in my store. I told her that she could ask whatever she liked.

"Then I'll get straight to it. Why would you have a store like this here?"

"Right! Right in the middle of this big prairie. I was surprised to see a lone shop on the horizon."

Miss Kino and Mr. Hermes, the motorrad, asked.

I thought it was a very natural question. Around this store, there was nothing but grasslands, forests, rivers, and lakes. It depends on the vehicle, but the distance to the nearest country is several days' travel.

"And are you, the manager, the only one who works here? There's no one else?" Mr. Hermes asked further.

I honestly answered their questions, one at a time. The reason why I set up a shop here was because I liked the location. Considering that I would be living in the store, it seemed obvious that I should choose a nice location. This place was very nice. However, I didn't tell them that the blockheads from my homeland forbade me from

setting up shop, and that I didn’t have any country I could go to.

Then I piled up my valuables and necessary equipment onto a truck and arrived here. From there, I built the store and house and set up my own shop. I also told her that I had no family and that though my parents are back in my homeland, I don’t know how they are doing now.

I have no idea whether Miss Kino or Mr. Hermes understood what I said.

“Do customers come?” Miss Kino asked.

“Yes. On average, there’s one every hundred days or so. Of course, all of them were either travelers or traders. Everyone stopped by out of curiosity.”

I did not lie.

“Then, have you sold anything until now?” Mr. Hermes asked.

“Nope. I am yet to sell a single thing.”

I did not lie.

There are two opinions regarding lying to customers just to be able to sell something; one is that it’s excusable, and another is that it shouldn’t be done. But in my opinion, there’s no pride in lying to myself, so I have never lied about this. Not now, and not in the future.

—

“This is the pride of my store.”

I said, and among my wares, I held the tiniest ‘Model no. 5’ in front of Miss Kino and Mr. Hermes.

I decided to have them take a look at it first. I placed it on top of the table so that they could examine it freely. I let the customers freely touch and investigate the items because I want them to think that my store is a good one. That is what I’m always aiming for.

In my homeland, the tools dealer in the eastern district was a horrible person.

He wouldn’t allow the tools in his shop to be touched, so the customers don’t have any idea about the quality of the products. His wares were lined up neatly in a row behind glass shelves, and the shop assistant will tell you with a cool face that they can only be taken out when you have decided to buy them.

I remember well how I left that store with so much resentment.

Around the time when I decided to set up my own shop, I was thinking of how I don’t want my shop to be like that. Even though it was a long time ago, I still remember it now.

I realized that I don’t want Miss Kino to feel the same disgust I felt that time, and I am somewhat glad that I became a person who can learn from bad examples.

“What is this?” Miss Kino asked after taking a brief look at it.

“Couldn’t you tell from a glance?” I said a bit jokingly (Of course, in a manner that wouldn’t be rude to the customer). I find it enjoyable to explain to my customers about the pride of my store, a product that I myself made .

“It’s a navy blue improvised suitcase. It doesn’t have buckles, but it has a switch,” Mr. Hermes who was looking from afar, answered.

“That’s right. It does appear to be a suitcase. I made it look that way. But it’s actually different. The truth is——”

I was slightly irritated. But if I express my irritation, the customer would be angry and leave. Even so I’m slightly irritated.

“It’s a high-power bomb,” I said.

Just as I thought, both Miss Kino and Mr. Hermes were surprised and looked dumbfounded. (Well, Mr.

Hermes' appearance doesn't change, but I think he was surprised too.)

'Products that appear very different from their function attract the interest of customers more. Dedicate yourself to 'catchy' products.'

That was written in a book.

"A high-power bomb, you say? Am I right in thinking that inside this thing, there's some explosive material and some sort of iron shrapnel for wounding and killing people?" Miss Kino asked.

"Yes. My store sells high-power bombs. Nothing else. This is a specialty store for high-power bombs. Also, the high-power bombs that I make are completely different from normal bombs. Its power is incomparable to that of existing explosives. In just one snot…"

It has been a long time since I last made a sales talk, and I couldn't speak without stuttering. I was very nervous since it was really long ago since I last spoke with a customer. Even though I practiced for it. I was embarrassed.

"S-sorry. ——In just one *shot*, this bomb can blow up completely a country, no matter how big it is. The explosion will produce tremendous temperatures and shockwaves that can melt, blow away, and burn everything above ground, including humans. At the same time, it spreads a powerful toxic chemical that can make ill any human who did not die instantly from the explosion. They will eventually die, suffering bit by bit."

"What kind of principle did you use?" Mr. Hermes asked.

"The same as the one used for the sun. It utilizes nuclear fusion," I replied with an answer prepared beforehand.

Only Mr. Hermes understood me at this point, and so I tried to explain simply to Miss Kino. After my explanation, I did not know whether Miss Kino completely understood its structure.

However, Miss Kino immediately remembered the more popular name for my product.

"You're saying that you made this 'hydrogen bomb' that can blow up a country in a blink of an eye?"

“Yes, that’s right.”

“On your own?”

“Yes.”

I answered Miss Kino and Mr. Hermes’ questions promptly like an excellent shop assistant. I decided to explain a bit more about my product.

“In my homeland, I came up with and tried to make a bomb according to that principle. The development was a success. However, it’s regrettable, because in my country, not a single person wanted something like it. That’s when I decided to set up my store outside the country to sell them. Today is the 3102nd day since I opened shop.”

“Haven’t you ever thought of trying this before?” Miss Kino asked.

“I haven’t. There’s no country I wish to destroy, or a person I wish to kill. I’m very satisfied just to know that I can make something I thought about and wanted to make. I think it’s very natural for a person who wanted to make something to make it, and a person who wanted

to use something to use it. If a person who wanted it were to buy it and use it, the person who made it will be very satisfied,” I answered. That’s how I answer whenever and whoever someone asks.

I decided to talk about the crucial point.

“Miss Kino, Mr. Hermes, would you like to buy the hydrogen bomb I created? Someday, somewhere, it might become useful to you. For instance, you can place it in a country you don’t like to blow it to bits, or you can create a new lake in the middle of nature.”

‘Use the most straightforward sales talk possible. If you have confidence in your product (if there’s none, that’s a problem), stick out your chest and offer it.’

That was written in a book.

“Right now we’re on a special sale, so if you buy one, I ’ll give you one more for free. It is exactly the same bomb , with power no less than the first. Both will include a fuse that can be used between three seconds to a hundred days. In addition to that, I also provide service to have its exterior repainted to a color you like, or maybe have your name engraved on it.”

'Moreover, it's good to give the product a 'push' by giving a value-added offer.'

That was also written.

"I have utmost confidence in my product, but I still offer periodic inspection of its functions. Misfire is impossible, nevertheless, in the case it fails on the second shot, or if you were not pleased by the strength of the explosion, I can give you a product replacement."

'Put the customer at ease by giving a warranty.'

This was also written.

Miss Kino looked as if she was pondering over something.

"By the way, how much does it cost?" Mr. Hermes asked. Of course, it's an expected question.

"It depends on how much the customer is willing to pay. I also don't mind trading with something of value," I answered the usual thing.

Miss Kino still looked like she was thinking hard about something. As to what she thinks, of course, I had no idea.

After a while, Miss Kino shook her head.

“Too bad, but right now, we have no need for a ‘ hydrogen bomb’. And so, we can’t buy it.”

Of course, I was disappointed upon hearing it.

Though it would be best if someone who wanted the bomb actually bought it, it’s very natural for a person who was not interested to not buy it.

Afterwards, Miss Kino proposed to buy or trade for some food. Then, I told her that if that’s going to be the case, I would like her to receive it without cost, as a favor .

I presented Miss Kino some vegetables and homemade beef jerky, boiled and put in airtight packs, as well as water. There are still more in my storehouse, and offered to fetch some for a while, and Miss Kino gladly expressed her thanks.

“It’s fine. This is ‘service’ for a customer,” I said. “If ever you find a need for a hydrogen bomb, you are welcome to come back anytime,” I added.

And then, I talked to Miss Kino about the road and the nearby country.

And then, since it was about time for lunch, I offered to share with her the thawed meat that I have for grilling. It has been a long time since I last had a meal with somebody.

After the meal, Miss Kino expressed her gratitude once more for the food, and rode to the west aboard Mr. Hermes.

—

After Miss Kino and Mr. Hermes went home, I cleaned the shop and tried changing the arrangement of my goods.

I thought about placing one item as decoration above the shelf. The item would be noticeable immediately upon entry into the shop.

If so, the shelf has to be strong. I’ll do that tomorrow.

—

It has been a long time since I last wrote a journal this long. My hands are completely tired from typing.

This day is very complete. It’s regrettable that I wasn’t able to sell my products, but there’s nothing I can do about the circumstances of my customers. However, I am really happy that a customer came.

I just hope that the next customer that will come will buy something.

Oh yes. I tried boiling the rest of the meat for dinner. It was delicious.

3103rd day since grand opening (Sunny)

There were no customers again today.

Up to now, there haven’t been any cases of customers coming two days in a row, and I don’t think there would be any in the future.

And so, of course, I can’t close the shop.

I reinforced the shelf, and decorated it with my ‘Model no. 3’, which was painted with my favorite color, blue.

As I thought, it might be more attractive if I put the items on the shelf. I’ll go with this for a while.

—

At lunch, I stir-fried some vegetables and meat, and I ate what was left in the evening.

店舗日誌

“Land of Heroes” — No Hero —

Chapter Four

"Land of Heroes"

— No Hero —

Kino breathed out white air as she unloaded the bag from Hermes' carrier. She was wearing a black jacket and a hat on her head, and her goggles remained strapped on her face. 'Canon' was hanging beside her right thigh.

She opened the bag. A disassembly-type rifle persuader was strapped on the inside of the cover.

"It looks like it will be useful right away, Kino."

"Yeah, though I'm not very happy about it."

The rifle was divided into two portions. The first half consists of a black metal frame, on the side of which, a prominently long cylinder was attached. The second half includes a wooden stock and a sniper's scope.

"There's seven of them."

"That's helpful."

Kino connected the two parts of the rifle and locked them together. She pulled its leather sling strap up front. She took out a cloth shoulder bag from the box on one side of Hermes' rear wheel. Inside was a magazine containing nine bullets, which she loaded into the rifle.

“Oh, right. Did you name that rifle after all?”

“I called it ‘Flute’.”

Kino released Flute’s bolt and loaded the first round. She briskly tucked the sash of the shoulder bag in a corner of her belt. While taking out Canon’s spare magazine from inside,

“Hermes.”

“Hmm?”

“If I do not come back, then by that time I got someone else to ride you.”

“Ok. Well, if possible, a person like you would be nice.”

Kino touched Canon on her right side. “I’ll try.”

She transferred the spare magazines inside the pouch.

“Just in case, I’m going to say it now. ——Goodbye Kino.”

“Yeah. ——Goodbye,” Kino answered.

"Yup. Then in that case, have a nice day. Never mind the souvenirs," Hermes said in a tone of voice without any hint of tension.

"Sure, I'll be going now," Kino said with a face that was a little stern but with a hint of amusement.

—

Kino slowly put her head out from her spot.

Both sides of the street were lined up with identical apartment buildings. There was an arch leading to a courtyard. Hermes was parked and concealed in the interior of this courtyard.

Heavy clouds covered the surface of the sky, giving it a dull gray and overcast look. The cold wind blew strongly from time to time.

There was no sign of life between the three-storey brick buildings along the street, and broken glass

windows are visible here and there. On the cobblestones, there were freely growing weeds and naturally-made dead tracks.

Kino rushed out and ran at full speed to the other side of the building.

At the moment Kino took cover beside the entrance stairs, a bullet came flying towards her, and quickly passed through to her side. The fierce hum of the bullet that sped past the speed of sound resonated.

“There you are,” Kino muttered, as she saw a person’s silhouette with a poised rifle on the other side of the street.

She then dodged and disappeared to the side of the building.

—

“He went out. He’s fast,” a tall man said.

“So it was a young person. He abandoned the motorrad, eh… He has a rifle too. Be alert,” a bald man holding a pair of binoculars said. The men around him nodded.

There were seven men.

A bald man. A very short man. A bearded man. A big, muscular man. A man wearing a thick hat. A tall and skinny man. A man carrying a big rucksack.

Everyone appeared to be over fifty years of age. They were wearing similar clothes that were full of cloth patches — heavy pants and jacket of a navy blue color. Belts with pouches for ammunition were wrapped around their waists and chests. Only the bald man was wearing a hand persuader holster on his right hip.

Everyone was grasping rifle-type persuaders in their hands. For every shot, the ejection pod had to be manually reloaded, bolt-action style. The rifles have wooden stocks.

The tall man who had fired the shot earlier expertly operated the bolt to reload. His was the only one with a sniper’s scope attached to it.

The bald man spoke. “Let’s follow him.”

—

With their persuaders positioned by their hips, the men slowly moved forward along the walls of the houses on both sides of the street.

As they passed in front of the courtyard where Hermes was parked, they silently peeked at the alley where Kino had been hiding. There was no other place she could hide in on both sides of the alley.

Without raising their voices, the men moved according to the direction the bald man pointed out with his left arm. They advanced without hesitation, one pair at a time, while providing back-up to each other.

They came out of the narrow alley to a neighboring street that looked similar. There was nobody.

The man with the hat who went first found barely visible footprints. When the men returned to their hiding

place in the alley, the bald man spoke. “He escaped to the east.”

“There are many wide roads in the eastern district. It will be difficult for him to hide,” the rucksack-carrying man said from the side.

“He probably doesn’t know. That’s good for us.” Next to him, the very short man said with a laugh.

Shortly after, “No. —That guy must have escaped leeward. The sounds will not reach here, but the sounds will reach that place,” the tall man said. The wind that blew through the street wound up in the alley. A thin cloud of dust rose up.

“……”

The men looked at each other silently. They breathed out white air.

The bald man gave several small nods, and then spoke .

“Don’t let down your guard. That guy was better than I thought. At this rate, he will be cornered once he reaches the eastern border. Kill without hesitation.”

“Okay,” “Understood,” the men replied nervously.

—

The street in between the apartments extended straight to the east. It ended in a park full of dead trees, where it was divided into two directions.

On the side of the street with buildings, the men separated into two groups and silently moved forward. The park at the end of the street looked small.

Going first, the man with the hat traced the footprints. He carefully walked with his persuader positioned low beneath his waist. The footprints on the right side of the street continued straight to the park.

The men proceeded quietly. They approached the park until the shapes of the dead trees could be clearly seen. Suddenly, the man with the hat stopped. He raised his left fist up to his shoulder, and the men behind him halted. At the same time, everyone looked out in all

directions, and the last two people in the line aimed their persuaders to the back.

“……”

The man with the hat looked the footprints at his feet with his sharp eyes.

From there, the footprints continued a bit and then suddenly vanished. On the other side, there were neither traces of jumping, nor a place to jump from.

The man with the hat slowly backed away by four steps.

He traced back his own footprints. He confirmed the depth of his own, as well as the footprints of their target. Then he turned his body and cautiously went back while carefully watching his every step. The other men observed in silence.

The man with the hat stopped in his tracks. There was a little hesitation in his footsteps. He noticed traces of jumping on the right side. When the man raised his head, he saw a dimly lit alley, blocked by the debris of a collapsed roof.

The man with the hat pointed his persuader towards the alley.

And then the man’s right thigh burst open. Blood and flesh scattered.

“Guh!”

Only a scream and the sound of a falling body were heard from the street.

“A sniper!” the large man shouted from a nearby wall. All the men clung to the wall for cover. The man who was shot twisted his body to an upright position, pressing down his right thigh with both hands. Fresh blood overflowed from the wound.

“From which direction?!” the bald man shouted.

With an anguished expression, the man with the hat attempted to raise his right hand to point. At that moment, a second bullet crushed his left knee.

“Gyah—!” The man with the hat writhed in pain. He tumbled face down, trembling and shaking while blood oozed from both of his legs.

“Damn! Where is he?!”

“There was no gunshot!”

“Which direction?!” The men shouted while clinging to the wall. They were looking out in front.

—

Kino has positioned Flute beside the debris, and was peeking through the scope. The cylinder from the side was screwed to the tip of the barrel. That suppressor (gunshot silencer) extinguished most of the gunshot’s sound.

From the scope’s view, on the main street at the end the dark and narrow alley, the man who fell down was clearly visible.

The man’s mouth was wide open.

—

“Gaaaaah!”

The man who was shot raised a scream. He was moving his arms, trying to crawl even if only a little to a safe place. He exerted himself, but barely moved.

“Wait! I’ll go!”

The large man left his persuader and removed his ammunition belt. Then he jumped out to save his fallen comrade.

—

Kino aimed at the new target, moved her aim a little, and fired.

“Don’t come out!”

At the same time as the bearded man’s scream, half of the head of the large man was blown off like a dropped tomato. Both of his hands were still turned towards the fallen man; and as he collapsed forward, his body made a blunt, loud noise. He stopped moving soon after.

The tall man saw the blood and brains fly out to the left, and screamed.

“To the right! Not in front! It was from the side alley!”

“Flares!” the bald man said, and the men lit and threw away the flares they had with them.

They dropped down and hit the alley wall as a dull purple smoke enshrouded them.

Just before the cloud thickened, Kino aimed and fired at the stomach of the man struggling on the ground.

After firing, Kino picked up the four empty cartridges by her side, and made her escape.

—

The smoke in the alley only lasted for a while before it was cleared away by the wind blowing from the main street.

The tall man established his aim to the back of the alley. Nobody was there anymore.

The bald man squatted beside the man with the hat.

His legs and stomach were stained a deep red. The rucksack-carrying man was desperately pressing down his clothes, but the pouring of the blood did not show any sign of stopping. He was slightly steaming up.

"I'm sorry…. I failed you, guys…," the man with the hat said with a thin voice.

"Don't talk," the bald man said.

"Enough… I don't see a thing anymore…" As tears flowed out from his big, gaping eyes, the man with the hat died.

"……"

The bald man gently closed his comrade's eyes.

He searched the chest of the corpse and pulled out a pendant with its chain. It was a small, round pendant with a star design. He removed the chain and put it in his breast pocket.

Meanwhile,

"……"

The bearded man silently held out the large man's pendant. The bald man took it and carefully placed it in his pocket like the other one. The clinking of the two metals made a small, dry sound.

The two corpses were placed on the stone pavement. Their faces were covered by cloth.

“We’ll bury them later. After killing that guy, that is,” the bald man said.

“The rifle that guy used was probably an automatic-fire type with a gunshot suppressor. Its accuracy was also good. It’s an excellent persuader,” the rucksack-carrying man said while aiming his persuader and looking at his surroundings.

The tall man nodded. “If only we have that, too.”

“It’s too late to talk about this. What we can do now is to do our best with what we have,” the bald man said monotonously.

The bald man spread a map he took out from his breast pocket. He held it in a way that wouldn’t let it get blown away by the wind. In the faded map, the appearance of the circular country was accurately drawn. At the end of several parallel streets heading to the east was a long park.

Across the park, a street with the same apartments continued on, and over there, the words ‘almost collapsed’ was written with a pen.

“Do you think he would run away just like this?” the tall man asked.

“If it were me, I will wait in ambush somewhere again. He would have come here without abandoning the motorrad but that engine is just too noisy,” the bearded man answered.

“Then… at the ‘street ruins’ across the park?” the rucksack-carrying man asked.

The bald man thought for a few seconds while looking at the map, and then spoke. “That makes sense. If he was thinking that we would give chase immediately, he wouldn’t waste his time crossing the park. He would be hiding in the building on the other side, let us get past and then annihilate us from behind in the park or the main street. What do you think?”

Without letting his vigilant eyes rest, the tall man said in a whisper, “If it were me, that’s what I would do. With an automatic-type, I’ll take on everyone at once.”

The bald man gave a small nod.

“We’ll divide into two groups and search the balcony from both corners of the park. ——We will outsmart him.”

—

“This is boring…” Hermes muttered.

In the deserted courtyard, the broken windows and clothes hung out to dry rustled as the wind blew.

“So boring…” When he muttered for a second time, a gunshot rang from afar.

“Oh, maybe Kino was done in already?” Hermes said, then he heard several shots in rapid succession.

“Oh, alive, still alive.”

“I was found so easily!” Kino said while running down the stairs of a building.

The short man and the rucksack-carrying man fired several rounds towards the third floor balcony where Kino was hiding.

Kino, who landed on the first floor, rushed through the living room and kicked open the doorway. At the same time, chipped wood scattered as two bullets that came flying bored two holes on the door.

“There are two people from the right… They separated into two groups, huh?”

Kino was in the eastern corner of the street, in the very last apartment facing the park. Right before its door was the road parallel to the park that ran north-south, and the expanse of the park with dead trees.

“I’ll be in serious trouble if I get cornered. There are only a few directions to go to…”

Kino went south inside the house and found a window made of frosted glass in the bathroom. She quietly raised open the dusty window and came out to the courtyard. She passed through an arch and went to a corner of a wide street that ran east-west. She lay down and put her arms around Flute, ready to shoot at any moment.

Kino spied towards the direction of the park. On the other side of the street was a similar entrance to a courtyard, and immediately to the left was a crossing on the main road to the park.

Around the corner of the building on the opposite side , the tip of the barrel of a rifle could be seen; right next to it was the face of the short man.

At the moment Kino hid her face, a bullet came flying and bounced on the stone pavement.

Kino got up and carried Flute. She pulled out Canon with her right hand, and fired one round towards the corner without taking aim.

The bullet flew towards the park, and the men backed away from the gunshot.

Kino immediately transferred Canon to her left hand. She dug her empty right hand to the cloth bag and took out one bottle. It was a medicine bottle containing a greenish liquid explosive. A short fuse was stuck in the mouth of the bottle.

Kino fired one shot from Canon to ignite the fuse. The bullet opened a hole in the courtyard wall.

She pitched the bottle with an under throw. The bottle slowly made its way diagonally across the street, and with a clink, dropped near the corner of the building without breaking.

Kino immediately squatted down, and covered the opening of her ears with both hands.

—

“Grenade!”

The short man who was crouching in the corner to aim , yelled as he saw the bottle thrown at him.

“Get down!”

The short man stood up and dropped down as his comrade pulled him. He got down with his feet pointed towards the corner.

The bottle exploded.

—

The explosion sent out large quantities of the characteristic white smoke of liquid explosives, covering the entire crossing.

This scene was also witnessed by the three men heading towards the battlefield from the north side of the park road. A second later, the low echo of the explosion was heard.

“Is that him?” the bearded man said.

The tall man peeped through the scope. As the white smoke quickly dissipated, he saw moving people through the crosshairs of the scope. The two fallen men were trying to get up.

“The two are still alive,” the tall man said, and the bald man spoke.

“Let’s join up. It’s dangerous in the streets; let’s exit through the courtyard. If you see him, shoot.”

The three men entered a nearby street. From the nearby courtyard, they passed through a building one after another.

The tall man guarded the south, while the bearded man took the north.

Over there, the stone pavement was dyed black from the explosion and fragments of the building were scattered about. Almost all of the glass windows nearby were broken.

The bald man looked at the two, and raised their upper bodies when he confirmed that there were no major injuries. He dragged them right next to the building and leaned them on the wall.

"Are you okay?"

The rucksack-carrying man shook his head a few times . Dust fell off him.

"My ears were badly injured… **cough!** Other than that, I'm fine."

"I'm not gonna die yet," the short man said. His face was covered by scratches. Blood was flowing down his cheeks. The hem of his pants was slightly burnt.

"Yeah…"

The bald man handed the rucksack-carrying man a bottle of water.

"Where did that guy disappear to…? Is he dead?" the short man asked while wiping away the blood from his cheeks.

The bald man answered. "No, he's still alive. Like us, he used the explosion as a chance to continue through the courtyard. He was afraid of getting cornered, so he must have run to the south side. We can't trace his footsteps in the dust."

"Son of a bitch…," the short man murmured with a hint of annoyance. There were cuts in his mouth, and blood dripped from it. The rucksack-carrying man silently passed him the water bottle.

The short man spewed out the water mixed with blood .

"There he is. Crossing the park," the tall man said. He was sitting with one knee up, right elbow on his right knee. He was looking through the scope of the rifle poised on top of his left knee.

Everyone looked at the same direction. The bald man looked at the target with his binoculars.

The place was quite far to the south, in the park with dead grass and weeds. From there, the silhouette of the person running across looked like a grain of rice with the naked eye, but with binoculars, the shape of a rifle was clearly recognizable.

"It's far. Can we get him?" the bald man asked.

"……"

The tall man silently twined the leather strap of his rifle on his left arm. He balanced the rifle and tried to catch the running opponent in the scope's crosshairs. He slightly aimed higher and fired.

A high-pitched gunfire rang. The men looked at the target. The target continued to run.

He quickly loaded a second bullet.

"……"

The tall man fired. The target continued to run.

Third shot. A strong wind blew and raised a cloud of dust.

Fourth shot. The target continued to run.

The fifth round was fired. Only a little more and the target would have finished crossing the park, when the target fell forward.

“Did you get him?” the rucksack-carrying man asked from behind.

“Nope. He took cover,” the bald man said, looking through the binoculars.

“Why?”

The moment the short man asked this,

“Everybody down!” the bald man shouted. A figure aiming towards their direction was reflected in the binoculars.

“!”

In response, the men dropped down instantly.

Only the tall man, who was removing the last empty cartridge from his rifle, remained in his position.

As Kino heard the sound of the fifth bullet tearing through the air, she pretended to fall diagonally, prostrate on the dead grass. She then positioned Flute and looked through the scope. She soon saw the men drop down. She looked at the person who had been firing at her earlier.

Kino aimed at that man. The distance was considerably far, and the wind was blowing. She moved the crosshair a little diagonally upwards from where the man is.

She fired. And continued to fire.

No gunshot was heard. There was only the buzz of the

bullets being incessantly fired, and the nearby stone pavement and brick buildings being chipped off soon after in succession.

The four men covered their heads with their arms while lying down. Only the tall man remained positioned on his empty persuader, glaring through its scope towards the person who was firing at them.

“……”

He glared in silence.

—

When the nine bullets of the magazine were spent, Flute’s bolt retracted and remained in its position.

The man in the scope’s view did not change his position.

“No good, huh… I thought at least one bullet would hit him.”

Kino stood up quickly, and while thin smoke was still rising from the heated barrel, she carried Flute under her arms and ran the remaining distance to the park.

She soon crossed it and entered the wide street.

Before her was a mountain of rubble.

—

“Let’s follow. Spread out horizontally. Avoid the front of the street where he fled, and cross the park immediately. He won’t be able to climb high up the ‘street ruins’. Be alert out front.”

As the bald man gave instructions, the prostrate men raised their heads. With their glittering eyes surrounded by creases, they stared towards the direction they’re heading to.

“Let’s go.”

The shoulder of the tall man, who still sat in his position, was tapped by the short man, whose face was now slanderous.

"Hey…," the tall man said. A bead of sweat trickled down his cheek.

"What?"

The tall man took out five bullets from his ammunition pouch.

"That guy, that bastard…, I'll kill him…"

He pushed the bullets firmly into the rifle, one bullet a time.

"Sure," the short man nodded, helping up the man who was filling the rifle with bullets.

"I'll definitely kill him," the man who stood up said in a thunderous voice.

"I understand. ——Let's go."

The five men set off with the tall man going last.

Blood started to gradually seep out from the flank of his jacket.

——

There were five gunshots after the explosion. And then it became very silent.

"It's not yet over? ——Could it be that Kino is having such a hard time? ——That, or she's giving the other side a hard time?" Hermes complained.

"How boring…. Well, since the weather is bad, it's not a bad idea to stay underneath this building. Finally it's getting cold, but I wonder what Kino will do if the snow continues to fall. I don't like to fall down every day…," he complained once again.

——

"There…," the rucksack-carrying man said.

The road was filled with the collapsed portions from the destroyed second floors of the apartments on both sides. The rubble makes poor foothold, but created a number of hiding places. The men concealed themselves in a place where the rubble was around a man's height.

"Hey," the short man spoke to the tall man. He pointed to a hole in a collapsed wall on the left side.

"I'll be the decoy. I'll run to that hole, and if he shows his face, take him down. Whether it's one of my arms or both, this time, be patient," he said while grinning.

The bald man and the tall man looked at each other, then nodded.

The tall man clambered up the rubble, and slowly raised his head and persuader as much as he can.

"I'll get you…," he murmured.

"Let's go!"

The short man jumped out. He pushed through the rubble and ran towards the hole. At the same time, the tall man rose up in a kneeling position. On the other side of the rubble, he saw the head and rifle of the opponent peeking out.

“?”

The tall man noticed that the opponent did not aim towards the man who had jumped out.

From the beginning, the opponent was aiming roughly towards his direction. At the moment he showed his face, the opponent finished adjusting the aim.

“……”

The man ground his molars.

—

Kino fired.

The bullet instantly moved to the top of the rubble.

It hit the tall man’s wide open left eye, and penetrated to the back of his head.

—

When the man who ran and safely made it to the wall turned around, he saw blood spurting from the head of his fallen comrade.

“That bastard! Damn it!” the man screamed. He revealed himself from the hole and tried to aim, but in the next moment, his rifle burst flying. A second bullet grazed his right arm and made a scratch.

The man concealed himself in the hole, and then shouted. “There he is! Behind that car’s shade! Bottom left!”

At the end of the rubble where the men were concealed, there was an abandoned car smashed by collapsed bricks. The bald man showed his face for a moment to check.

"We'll get him. A grenade. Distance, eighty."

The rucksack-carrying man put down his rucksack and took out a rifle grenade from inside. The thick cylinder at the top contained blasting powder, while the narrow cylinder at its rear has a wing attached to it.

He opened the bolt of his own rifle, and inserted special blank ammunition for the wooden warhead. He plugged the grenade at the tip of the barrel, and erected the gun sight from the side of the rifle.

The bald man spoke. "Straight ahead."

The rucksack-carrying man nodded. He pulled out the safety pin on the grenade's tip. He pressed the rifle's stock to the ground, adjusted the angle with the gun sight, and pulled the trigger.

Boom—!

The grenade made a big, heavy explosive sound as it was launched.

—

Kino reacted instantly when she heard the explosion. From the side of the car, she jumped to the right and ran six steps.

Behind her, the grenade exploded at the side of the car.

—

The bearded man gestured a thumbs-down to the man hiding behind the wall. The short man replied with a big shake of the head.

“He ran to the side! To the leftmost side of the street!”

“One more shot. A little to the left,” the bald man said.

The man put down the rucksack, quickly reloaded blank ammunition, and placed a grenade at the tip of the rifle. He aimed, and fired.

—

While dust and small stones dropped off Kino, she raised herself from her prone position. Then she sat on the top of the rubble, looking upward. The car that received a direct hit had all of its glass broken, and was reduced to scrap.

With the second explosion, Kino set up Flute. A black mass rose up in the cloudy sky.

Kino did not peek through the scope. From the bottom of the metal scope, she drew a high parabolic aim towards the mass and fired.

An explosion occurred mid-air in the street. The explosion left a black smoke, and fine debris scattered in the surrounding surface.

“What?” The man who launched the grenade raised a surprised voice.

“He shot it down! He shot down the grenade!” the short man shouted while clinging to the hole in the wall.

“What a guy,” the bearded man muttered in shock.

“Son of a bitch…,” the short man spat. His rifle was lying on top of the rubble. As he stuck out his face to spy, a bullet struck immediately. This time the bullet cut a line through his cheek, and crushed one brick of the building.

“Damn it!” The man hid himself.

—

While holding Flute, Kino removed the magazine with her left hand and inserted a new one.

Debris fell from the top of her hat when she shook her head lightly.

—

“I’ll go.”

Among the three men in front of the rubble, it was the bearded man who spoke. The other two looked at him.

From the hole in the wall, the short man wrapped the wound in his right arm with cloth using his left hand and mouth.

"I'll go. I'll take the rest of the explosives. At this point, there's no reason for my comrades to get reduced any further. I'll try to 'persuade' him."

The bald man who was looking at the bearded man for some time asked, "Why does it have to be you?"

The bearded man spoke. "I am the oldest, see. You should respect your elders."

"……. Fine…," the bald man said, and took out a small shoulder bag from the rucksack. Inside were four box-shaped explosives. The other person took out from his waist pouch a tobacco-like object with a long cord. It was the fuse.

"It will take seven seconds after pulling the string."

"I know."

The bearded man took it, carefully inserted it in the explosives and stopped it with his hand.

The man pulled the pendant from his neck, and removed it.

“Take care of this,” he held it out to the bald man and then, “I’ll take it back later.”

“… Right.”

The bearded man dropped the pendant onto the outstretched hand, and held the hand tightly. Then he also held the hand of the other man.

The bearded man inserted the fuse in the explosive, and hung the shoulder bag around his neck. He turned it around so that it wouldn’t be visible from the front. The tip of the cord was concealed by his neck.

And then,

“We have something to say!” a thick and loud voice came out. “We have something to say!”

The bearded man lifted up both his hands, and slowly revealed himself from the rubble.

Upon seeing him, the face of the man in the wall changed color ——he instantly understood what he was trying to do.

The bearded man walked over the rubble. No bullets came.

Slowly, the man walked while checking his foothold. He passed in front of the hole in the wall.

—

“We have something to say!”

The wind carried the man’s voice to Kino’s ears clearly .

Kino looked once at the hole in the wall and moved her aim to the head of the man with upraised hands.

“We have something to say!”

When the bearded man had advanced halfway through, a voice replied, “Do not get any closer, please talk from there.”

It was a voice just loud enough for the man to hear.

“We have something to say! I don’t have a persuader! I ’ll go there!” the man shouted as he continued to walk.

“I can hear you just fine, so please talk from there.”

He ignored the voice and kept walking.

“If you advance any further, I’ll shoot. Please stop.”

He heard the order when the remaining distance was only about one-third. The bearded man saw the opponent aiming at him. It was a young person wearing a hat and goggles.

The bearded man laughed once. And then,

“Uwaaaaaaaaa!” He ran as he roared. He grasped the bag in his back with his right hand, and held the cord with his left.

The first bullet hit his belly. The second bullet hit his right lung.

The man continued to rush forward. He pulled the cord with his left hand. The man’s right hand threw the bag using his right hand with full force.

It was the moment when he released it from his hand.

The third bullet hit the bag. In mid-air, the cloth made a ripping sound as a hole tore through it, and the bag’s forward force was extinguished.

After throwing, the man who rolled face down saw the bag fell down right in front of his eyes.

“! ——Uwaaah!” While screaming, the man rose to pick it up, and ran as he held it in his arms.

—

Kino did not fire a fourth bullet. She turned away from the field.

She avoided the edge of the crumbling street and began to run at full speed towards the center.

—

There was an explosion.

The blast broke through the length of the street. There was a violent tremor, and the buildings began to collapse .

The man in the wall jumped out as it was filled with dust. Soon the wall collapsed.

No one could be seen any more in the street, where the dust rolled up like thunderclouds.

—

The shock from the explosion shook Hermes a little.

“Oh—— Earthquake, it’s an earthquake,” Hermes muttered.

“‘The earthquake intensity just now is about one-half? —The shaking is especially greater in seaside areas, so be on alert for tsunamis. More details will be provided shortly in the news,’” he further said to himself.

“So boring…” he murmured.

—

The wind blew, and the dust was wiped off and disappeared from the rubble-filled street.

“Did we do it…?” the bald man said as he looked at the mountain of rubble that was now higher than before. At the same time, one part of a building collapsed.

He went looking for his comrades. On the left side, the rucksack-carrying man, and a little further on top of the rubble the short man, were lying. Dust and stone fell off both of the men as they stood up. Harsh coughing sounds were heard.

As the bald man helped his comrade up, he noticed something and picked it up.

“Did we do it?” the rucksack-carrying man asked.

“We don’t know yet,” the bald man answered and showed him what he was holding. It was a right boot, containing a torn leg.

“……”

The boot looked familiar.

—

“Gone. He’s gone.”

The short man was up front, with his rifle raised to his waist, proceeding atop the rubble. Behind him, the bald man aimed ahead with the rifle's scope.

"That degree of explosion would blow off everything and wouldn't leave any trace…," the rucksack-carrying man said. A grenade was already inserted in his rifle.

"We can't be careless."

"Yeah."

They passed through the center of the explosion. Stuff that appeared to be internal organs were stuck on the side of the wall. The men advanced further.

"I found it! That bastard's blood!" the short man exclaimed. The bald man approached, looking carefully at his surroundings.

On the street rubble, there was a small pool of blood, from which traces of blood started. Blood drips the size of the tip of a thumb were scattered here and there, and continued ahead the street.

"We did it. He bled considerably," the short man said.

“Depends on where he was hit… However, he is definitely injured,” the bald man said without changing expression.

“Let’s follow.”

—

The bloodstains extended towards the east.

Eventually, the crumbled buildings on both sides disappeared from view. Right in front was a not-so-high iron fence completely tumbled on its side. Beyond it was an expanse of land, and beside it was a large concrete building. It was a three-storey building with many glass windows.

“He escaped into the schoolhouse,” the short man said . The three men concealed themselves behind two abandoned cars on the road in front of the fence. The bloodstains were lying beyond the fence, straight through the schoolyard.

“An ambush, eh?” the rucksack-carrying man said.

“Grenade. Can we do it from this distance? How many left?” the bald man asked as he lowered his body, looking out front with the binoculars. The rucksack-carrying man answered.

“It’s possible. But barely, since we’re aiming from a low position. There are five shots left.”

“I’ll get him to come out. I’ll be the decoy. Even if he shoots my leg, don’t come out. Fire four grenades in a row towards that room. Got it?”

The two men nodded, and replied with the same word .

“Understood.”

—

“I’m very sorry…. However…,” Kino said. Both of her hands were dyed a deep red.

—

As usual, the sky was covered with unbroken clouds.

While the bald man was keeping his body low, he went across the schoolyard holding his rifle, one step at a time. There was nowhere to hide.

On both sides of the car, the two men were peeking through their scopes, their fingers ready in the triggers. They were suppressing their rough breathing, staring at the broken pieces of glass windows of the schoolhouse for a good thirty seconds.

A gunshot echoed.

It was from the schoolhouse. Four shots fired in succession were heard. And then the roaring sounds of bullets.

The bald man dropped down, and then shouted. “ Second floor! Third classroom from the right!”

The two men reacted, aiming towards that direction. They saw a barrel from the broken glass of a window, from which the high-pitched gunshots were coming out. The bullets drifted far above the car.

Two grenades were launched at the same time.

They flew in a low trajectory, breaking through the glass and flying into the room. They exploded.

All the glass windows of the classroom shattered. The pieces of shattered glass fell into the balcony.

“Next!”

“Alright!”

The men fired two more grenades.

Both shots flew into the window frame, right where they aimed.

The man lying down in the school yard peeked through the scope as he listened to the explosions.

No moving figure could be seen inside the wrecked classroom. No one fired a shot. All of a sudden it became quiet, and the sound of the wind could be clearly heard.

“Did we do it?” the man murmured.

—

Dried bloodstains crossed the schoolyard, climbed up the staircase on the right side of the schoolhouse, and headed towards the second floor hallway.

The short man put out his head into the long and dark corridor. The bloodstains extended towards the third classroom. Even from the corridor, the blown off door dangling from its hinge was visible.

The men walked in the hallway, prepared to shoot at any moment. They came to the front of the door; while one person was poising his persuader, another kicked the door open.

They saw what's inside. The grenade's fragments pierced the ceiling, floor and inner walls. Several desks rolled over, their frames made of iron pipes bent.

"There's nothing here…," the short man said, slowly entering. Inside, there was nobody. There was no corpse.

The bald man entered while the rucksack-carrying man guarded the back.

"Hey. It's that guy's rifle. Seems like it's still usable."

The short man found the persuader trapped underneath a desk, and lightly poked it with his foot. Several fragments pierced the stock, but its scope and parts were safe under the desk.

As the short man tried to pick it up,

"Get it later. We have to see his corpse," the bald man said.

The short man lifted up his crouching body, and did not notice the thin wire wrapped around Flute's trigger.

"Hey."

The rucksack-carrying man found bloodstains underneath the desk. It went through another door, going out to the hallway. Sticky dots were rubbed off the floor.

“What a tough guy,” the short man said with a grin. With him first, they went out to the hallway once again. There were footprints from the left foot, and on the right side, there was blood.

This did not surprise them, and continued searching the next two classrooms. They opened the first door, and saw that there were marks of it being closed. There were no traces of anyone leaving this room.

The two men poised their rifles; the short man crouched to the side of the door, slowly turning the knob.

Tmp—

He pushed the door. It opened with a creak.

While poising his rifle, the short man moved his gaze from the blood clots on the floor to the inside of the room . A red line crawled on the floor, extended to the center of the classroom, and ended underneath a desk.

On top of the table, there was a familiar face.

“……”

It was the face of the bearded man. His eyes were shut, as if he was sleeping. Behind it was the head, and underneath was the neck.

“……”

And there was a desk wet with blood. There was nothing else in the classroom.

“Ah… aah…”

These were the only sounds that leaked out from the short man’s mouth. His eyes were wide open as he stepped into the room. Shortly, the other two men also saw the traces. On top of the desk, they saw the freshly severed head.

“……”

The severed head was on top of the cloth where it was wrapped some time ago. The cloth was dyed deep red.

"It was not his blood…," the rucksack-carrying man said.

"Ah… a-aah… That bastard… That bastard…" While moaning, the short man approached the desk.

"That bastard… What a thing to do… Damn it… How awful… That bastard… To desecrate the body of a dead man… That bastard… That bastard…"

Clatter

The rifle fell from the man's hands. The short man, while crying, stretched out both his hands towards his comrade's head.

"How horrible… This sort of thing…"

He touched the cheeks with both hands,

"I'll take him on… I'll take him on… Ah…"

And lifted his comrade ('s head).

"Stop!" the bald man cried out. At the same time, a string tied to a hair on the back of the severed head got

pulled. On it, a waterproof match was attached, the tip of which was placed between two stones. As well as a fuse.

A small green bottle hidden in the hair fell on top of the cloth. Small sparks from the fuse scattered from the bottle’s mouth. The short man looked at it.

“Eh?”

It exploded.

—

The schoolhouse shook with a thunderous roar. All the glass panes of the classroom were blown off.

The white smoke was blown towards the balcony.

—

From the side of the stairs on the north side, Kino walked as she saw the smoke disappear from the hallway. She headed to the destroyed classroom.

With her right hand stained deep red with another person’s blood, she pulled out Canon and entered the wrecked classroom from the blown off door.

Of the three men, one person lost his upper body. Those were splattered all over the wall.

Another person was wriggling against the wall, bleeding from a glass fragment piercing his face. His trembling hands held a grenade, and he was trying to pull out the safety pin from its tip.

The bald man lying face up beside the door stirred. He tried to draw out his hand persuader from the holster on his waist using his right hand.

Kino stood in front of the man holding the grenade, and fired a bullet to his chest. The man let out a cry, and stopped moving.

With his bloody right hand, the bald man pointed his hand persuader towards Kino. He attempted to pull the trigger.

"It will not fire, you know," Kino said. The man's right hand applied force (to the trigger).

"?"

And no bullet came out.

The persuader dropped from the man's hand. The man looked at his right hand. His index and middle fingers had been torn off.

Kino stood beside the man.

"This young… it was a mere boy…," the man said while looking quietly at Kino.

"Why me? If you don't mind, can you tell me the reason?" Kino asked. The man took one deep breath, and spoke.

"What's wrong with protecting our own country…?"

"Your own country…?" Kino asked in return.

The man reached out his right hand to his own breast and pulled out the chain of a pendant with his thumb. It was a small, round pendant with a star design.

He put it up in front of his face and looked at it.

"This place is our country…. That's why we fight…"

"……"

The man started to mutter, not paying attention to anyone in particular.

"Aah… We couldn't do anything. We couldn't do anything and returned shamelessly…. We couldn't become heroes. Everyone's gone…. At the very least, until the end, we will try to become heroes… by protecting this country…. Ah, even so, it was no good. Until the very end, we couldn't become heroes…"

Kino was listening.

The man spoke to Kino. "Come now, kill me quick. One shot… take me to where everybody is."

“There’s no need for that. You will die soon,” Kino answered. She replied to the man whose left hand was blown off, exposing a big, bloody mass of flesh.

“Whatever,” the bald man said with a grin.

And he died smiling.

—

Kino gently closed the man’s eyes.

“‘——Even if our heroes do not come back, they will always be alive in our hearts——’”

Kino murmured. And then she closed her eyes.

—

“Welcome back, Kino. You are stained with so much blood, are you hurt anywhere?”

“No. Probably.”

“You killed them all?”

“Yup.”

“Then, everything’s fine now?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. No one will shoot us without warning while we’re riding anymore.”

“Kino. The pouch on your left.”

“Hmm?”

“There’s a hole. Could it be that you were shot?”

“……. Ah, I didn’t notice at all…. When was it, I wonder? At the park, maybe?”

“Then, what about my souvenir?”

“Just this.”

"What's this? It's just a bullet."

"It's a bullet from the rifle those men used. Exactly like Flute's. I got a lot of these bullets."

"What was that about? Don't you have any other souvenirs?"

"Ah. I have a story for you."

"Eh? What kind?"

“Land of Heroes” — Seven Heroes —

Chapter Five

"Land of Heroes"

— Seven Heroes —

The sun has only risen halfway through when a traveler arrived at the gate. The sky was clear and sunny and the wind was cold.

The traveler came riding a motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). Boxes were mounted on both sides of the rear wheel, while a big bag was strapped on top of it.

The rider was wearing a brown coat, the long hem of which was rolled up to her thighs. She was wearing a hat with flaps covering her ears, eye goggles, and a bandana wrapped around her face for protection from the cold.

In the guard post outside the gates, the traveler introduced herself.

"Hello. I am Kino. This is my partner, Hermes. We hope to stay for three days."

The guard politely asked some questions, and then issued an entry permit to the traveler who identified herself as Kino and to the motorrad called Hermes.

The guard asked if she has something like a persuader (Note: A gun), and Kino replied with a nod.

“Are persuaders not allowed?” asked Kino.

“Not at all. It’s the other way around,” the guard answered with a smile.

—

Kino finally entered the country after passing through the white walls.

The interior of the country was flat and spacious. As a result, the roads and building sites were also wide, and there were many one-storey buildings. There were also numerous new buildings.

While waiting and reading the map she got, a guide came riding a small car. It was a kind-looking elderly man.

For a while, Kino had to listen to some welcoming remarks while she was led to a hotel by car. They passed through a wide and crowded street, and headed towards the central part of the country.

Upon arrival at the hotel, the guide talked more about the country.

This country grew from the merger of two countries 17 years ago. Until then, the land here now was just a territory of a tiny kingdom. On the other hand, far beyond the mountains, there was a democratic country with a very high population density.

One day the king lost his mind, and as a small country all they could possibly do was to seek help and cooperate with the other country. The other country, which was having trouble with their small land, accepted the offer. By becoming a democratic country, everyone was given the right to equality, and the two countries peacefully integrated. The king was sent to stay in a hospital.

In this country, all people between ages 18-50 were required to be registered as soldiers. They were being trained on a regular basis, and weapons were stored in every house in case they were summoned to fight in

times of war. For that reason, shooting has become a very popular national sport in this country.

"I see," Kino muttered as she recalled the words of the guard.

—

From noon, Kino and Hermes went around the country.

Kino acquired supplies for Hermes' maintenance, and shopped some more for the things she needed.

Near the walls, there was a sign saying 'Public Shooting Range'. Upon looking closely, an immense ground was laid out for it. The manager who came out told them that the facility was closed just for the day due to maintenance.

Kino introduced herself, and asked if she can practice shooting.

“Then, by all means please come tomorrow. You are free to use the facility as much as you want, and if it’s not too much trouble, please do teach us some things,” the manager answered with glittering eyes.

—

The second day.

As usual, Kino got up at the crack of dawn.

As always, she performed her light body exercises and practiced drawing out her persuaders.

“……”

She thought for a bit, and then continued.

After eating, Kino slapped Hermes awake, and headed to the shooting range.

In the shooting range, a lot of people had gathered early in the morning, from commoners to groups of people wearing military uniforms.

When Kino came, the manager she met the day before delightfully introduced her to everyone. When they were informed that she travels while protecting herself with her persuader, everyone thought this amazing and excitedly asked her to teach them various things.

“If you’re bad at this, you shouldn’t show off at all,” said Hermes.

—

In the shooting range, various shooting equipment, from point-blank to ultra-long-distance ones were available. For each one a convenient device was attached — an automatically moving target and a screen that can show where a distant target was hit.

In the annex of the facility, target dolls, women holding babies, and children with knives could be seen coming out from the windows and side corridors.

While a large number of people were observing, Kino borrowed some of the facilities. She carried out her shooting practice with ‘Canon’ and her other automatic-style hand persuader ‘Woodsman’.

Kino was applauded every time she hit something.

“Well, it’s not that easy…,” she murmured

“Master told you, hasn’t she? Keep your presence of mind in any kind of situation,” said Hermes.

—

“Miss Kino, don’t you have a rifle with you?” The manager asked Kino while she was having lunch in the cafeteria. Kino shook her head.

"Aren't you worried that you don't have a long-ranged weapon?"

Kino replied that surely, there were times when she felt like having one, but the thought of carrying a long rifle on Hermes was completely unreasonable.

Upon hearing this,

"I have exactly what you are looking for," the manager said gleefully, sounding like a salesman.

—

"Thank you for waiting. Here it is."

After the meal, the manager put on top of the table a box containing a rifle.

The rifle was divided into two portions. The first half consists of a black metal frame with a prominently long cylinder attached on its side. The second half includes a wooden stock and a sniper's scope.

"It is a silencing, automatic-type rifle that can be disassembled for easy transportation. It was the latest weapon developed in our country, and cleared problems in accuracy and strength. The provisions for our military has just started."

The manager advised Kino to try it out. Kino assembled the rifle according to an illustrated manual beside her.

"How is it? What do you think?"

Kino said that the handling wasn't bad and it seemed very easy to use.

"Won't you try shooting? Try it and please tell us what you think," the manager said.

Kino headed to the shooting range, and tried shooting with the borrowed rifle. She tried aiming on a far target using the scope placed on the cushion on top of the desk.

Each time a shot hits the black center of the target, the crowd behind her breaks into applause.

"Are you used to it yet?"

"I'm already familiar with it."

Hermes asked, and Kino answered with a shot. Cheers arose.

After several shots, she was met with a barrage of questions.

To a person who asked her who taught her how to shoot,

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you that," Kino answered.

To another person who asked her what kind of excellent facilities she practiced in,

"In the forest…," Kino answered.

To yet another person who asked her to at least tell him how she attained such a level,

"…. But I don't like recollecting painful experiences…" Kino answered.

Halfway through the afternoon.

Kino, Hermes and the manager were around a table in the dining room while having dessert.

"Wow, Miss Kino is so wonderful. Everyone was surprised. All of a sudden everyone is so motivated."

"Well, she has to live up to her reputation. It's nice to see Kino get praised once in a while," Hermes said.

"The more we train our shooting skills, the more we strengthen our country's defense. And as a result we can better protect our peace and safety."

"Does this country have potential enemies?" Kino asked. The manager answered looking slightly embarrassed.

"That is… The truth is this country, and the two separate countries before the merger, has never been at war. Apparently, there are no offensive countries nearby. Even though all of the citizens are drafted as soldiers,

none of them have shot anything other than paper and dolls. And so, I have no idea how long we would last in an actual battle. We never miss practice, and I can brag that each one of us is competent, but…”

Kino spoke. “Peace is a very good thing to have. I think that in times of emergency, we will see the result of your training. I’m sure everyone can fight better than they think they can.”

“Oh. I’m glad to hear those words. From here on, we will work even harder in our training.”

“That’s the spirit. As they say, ‘If you are prepared, you don’t need ukulele,’[6]” said Hermes.

“Huh?” The manager gave them a puzzled look.

“Hermes… are you doing that on purpose?”

“Doing what?”

Evening.

The manager told Kino that if she wanted to, and if it will not interfere with her journey, he wouldn't mind her having the rifle. They wanted their country's excellent persuader to be of use in her journey.

Kino gave it a little thought, and politely expressed her gratitude upon accepting the offer. Kino asked for the name of the rifle.

"Name… Oh, nothing in particular. We call it by its abbreviation, 'National Disassembly-Type Rifle No. 52."

"That's long."

"Later, I will think of some name for it," said Kino.

—

The third day.

During the morning, Kino went sightseeing around the country.

In the center, a palace from the times when the country was still a kingdom was still left standing. Its surroundings have been turned into a public park.

Upon being asked by Kino of his thoughts about the building,

"Not bad. It's like this all the time, anywhere. The king must have been scowled by the public for using tremendous amount of money to build such a luxurious palace. And after he was removed from his position, it was made into a park. 'Preserving a splendid building', like they say. But during the king's reign, they didn't praise it the least bit," Hermes said sarcastically.

In one corner of the park, there was a big black stone. The stone was like a wall.

Kino passed in front of it. Human figures were engraved on the stone. Young men, smiling, lined-up side by side.

"Excuse me. Is this a monument of some sort?" Kino asked a person who happened to pass by.

The man of about fifty years gave a big nod. "Oh, yes it is. This is a monument for heroes."

"Heroes, is it?"

"Ah. For people like me who came here from the country beyond, it was an unforgettable event. Long before the merger, that was about thirty years ago. In the country where I was born, the population has grown too much that it was so cramped. But the walls couldn't be extended further, and so we thought of sending out an expedition to look for new settlements. Twelve groups in every direction."

"Uh-huh. And then?"

"And then, we recruited young men and formed teams with seven men in each. They were supposed to come back after half a year, whether they succeed or fail in finding a good land. Eleven of the teams returned."

"I see. Then, these people are?"

"These seven, not a single one came back even after 10 years. It was the team that proceeded to the most dangerous mountain route. Probably, they met with

some sort of accident…. In the country, we felt sorry for them, and erected a monument for them. Engraved on it was their appearance at the time of their departure. —— And then, a long time has passed. After the merger with this country has been made, we left most of the buildings in our country as is after moving; only this stone was painstakingly transferred here, so that we will never forget their heroic deeds. This story is even written in our school textbooks."

Kino looked at the monument again. They were young and brawny men, with carefree smiles. They were carrying old-fashioned rifles, and hanging above their chests were pendants with the same design.

It was a small round pendant, with a star design.

The man spoke. "That's right. I think you should visit our old country. To the west, just beyond two big mountain ranges, there is a basin. Even now, the country should still be there. The walls, the buildings were left just as they were. We can never go back there again because this place is our country now, you see. But miss traveler, if you somehow come to visit the apartments, you might find the old buildings where many people once lived interesting. Identical buildings are aligned

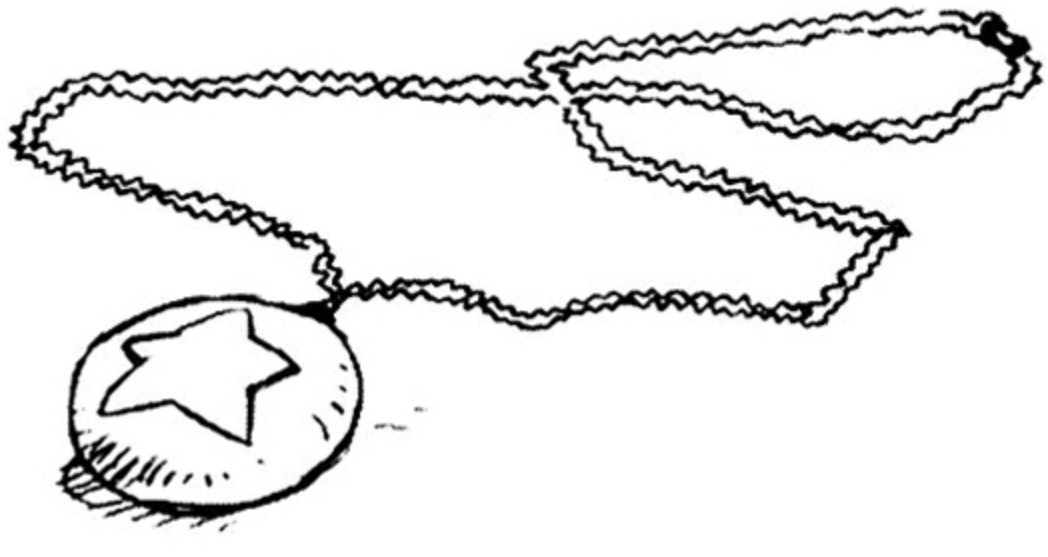
side by side; the inner courtyard was always filled with many people, and as a child I played there often. It’s so nostalgic.”

“Is that so? I think I’ll go there and see.”

She thanked the man and after he left, Kino looked at the characters carved in the monument.

Underneath their smiles, there was an inscription.

‘——*Even if our heroes do not come back, they will always be alive in our hearts*——’[7]



“A Tranquil Land” — Jog Trot —

Chapter Six

"A Tranquil Land"

— Jog Trot —

We were in a teahouse.

On the side of an unpaved road lined up with wooden poles was a lone house, the eaves of which had been turned into a teahouse.

Master Shizu was sitting by the porch, gazing leisurely at the afternoon scenery.

I was sitting across in front of him, on top of the hardened earth, similarly gazing at my surroundings.

Amidst the mild, sunny weather, the green and brown of the endless expanse of softly undulating fields blended together. It was dotted with a few houses accompanied with silos or barns.

Master Shizu muttered, “It’s such a tranquil land, isn’t it?”

I agreed in silence.

—

My name is Riku, I am a dog.

I have long, white, bushy fur. My face looked as if it’s happy and smiling all the time, but it doesn’t mean that I am. I was just born this way.

Shizu is my master. He is a young man who is always wearing a green sweater. He has lost his homeland due to some complex circumstances, and is now traveling in a buggy. We travel to various countries together.

Master Shizu’s journey doesn’t have any particular destination. No, it is aiming for somewhere, but this ‘ somewhere’ is not a place.

—

Following the road, we arrived in an isolated country situated in an enormous prairie.

We were permitted through the gate, in which there was no sort of screening whatsoever. The guard was very surprised since visitors seldom come to this country.

“Even if people bothered to come here, there’s nothing to see in this country.”

Just as he told us, the interior of the country had nothing but a dull, infinite expanse of flat plains. There was a bit of forest, but most of the land was composed of meadows and fields. It seemed like all of the residents were farmers.

Master Shizu rode for a while through the unchanging scenery, and eventually we found the teahouse.

—

“Travelers are really rare, you know. Anyway, please relax,” the old woman who brought us tea said.

She placed the tea, which was served in a cup without a handle, beside Master Shizu. It did not smell of poison.

Master Shizu thanked her. He placed his favorite sword that stood by his side right in front of me. It is my duty to watch over this sword when Master Shizu’s attention is away from it.

While drinking his tea, Master Shizu asked the old woman some questions about this country, such as whether the old woman has any other job. She sat down beside Master Shizu and replied.

Apparently, this country has taken leisure at doing just agricultural work. The population was small and thinly distributed. Only a handful can be called towns.

There were no nearby potential enemy countries. Even if there were, they wouldn’t gain anything from occupying this country.

Almost no travelers come. Even if they did, there were no tourist attractions here for them to see.

They only let each day pass by in peace.

“Mister traveler, where are you headed?”

To this question, Master Shizu only shrugged his shoulders in jest. “There’s no particular place I’m aiming for. I’m a vagabond,” he said truthfully.

“Oh my,” the old woman was a bit surprised. “In case you’re interested, immigrants are always welcome in this country. There is a surplus of land, and people who can help with the work are always appreciated. If you’re able , you can have a job as a guard.” Then she added, “But since nothing happens here, you’ll be free all the time.”

Master Shizu smiled a little. “That might be a good idea.”

—

The old woman returned to the kitchen.

While looking at the scenery, Master Shizu muttered, “ It’s such a tranquil land, isn’t it?”

I agreed in silence.

—

Far in the fields, a single tractor was moving. From our seats, we could see that it was moving in a very leisurely pace. It was approaching a house; perhaps it was finished with the day’s work.

“It might not be a bad idea to make a living here raising cattle. It’s something I have never done before… I no longer have to work for various people, or kill someone to survive, or wander aimlessly in the wilderness. I will be able to live each day in stability and safety. Perhaps, I could live a little bit longer…,” Master Shizu said slowly, still looking at a distance, and probably, looking at his past and his future.

“I guess so,” was the only thing I said. Whatever it was , the decision is in Master Shizu’s hands.

As Master Shizu tried to say something, the old woman came out and asked him, “Mister traveler, do you want another cup of tea?”

“Yes please,” Master Shizu said, and held out his cup.

The old woman poured tea from a small kettle.

After she finished pouring, Master Shizu placed the cup beside him. Along with the cup’s quiet tapping sound, the ground began to shake.

It’s probably an earthquake. The house and the ground shook slightly. The wooden house creaked and rattled. Waves formed inside the tea cup, spilling it a bit.

And then, the minor vibrations ceased. It only lasted for a few seconds.

“Oh dear,” the old woman quickly took a cloth and wiped the spilled tea. And then,

“?”

I noticed that Master Shizu's face has hardened into a very surprised expression. He was looking at the scenery before him.

I looked at the same direction… and was similarly surprised.

The house and the tractor that we have seen from afar only a while ago, vanished from sight.

"… The house disappeared?" Master Shizu spoke as he rose from his seat.

The old woman standing by his side looked in the same direction and spoke in a tone unchanged from before.

"Ah, I knew it. It has been a while. It might be too late to save them."

Master Shizu faced the old woman. "W-what just happened?"

The old woman told them to wait for a while, and started to talk to someone somewhere using the phone in the wall.

The old woman interrupted the call for a moment and spoke to Master Shizu.

“Mister traveler, there is a faster way to understand what you have just seen other than me explaining it to you. Go to the right and then turn left at the first intersection. Please do not get too close.”

—

Master Shizu rode the buggy, and followed the road as he was told.

Eventually, Master Shizu stopped the buggy atop a swell, and got off. I alighted from the passenger seat and went on top of the hood to look. I instantly understood what happened.

A hole opened up in the ground.

It was almost a perfect circle, with a diameter of about 200 meters. I have no idea how deep it was from where I stood. The ground had vanished vertically just like that.

Without a doubt, the house and the tractor from earlier were inside this hole.

“……”

Master Shizu looked in amazement. From behind, we heard a siren, and a crane truck approached. Master Shizu moved the buggy to make way.

Soon the truck moved in the vicinity of the hole, and extended the crane to look at the bottom. At the tip of the crane is a bucket for carrying people, which was suspended and moved down into the hole.

“They are… considerably prepared and skilled for this, ” Master Shizu murmured.

Another car stopped beside the buggy.

“Ah, travelers, eh? It’s dangerous so you’d better not go any nearer. You will find a teahouse when you turn back to the right, the old lady over there can tell you all the details,” said the man riding inside.

“A hole opened up, as you’ve seen,” the old woman spoke in a fairly normal tone to Master Shizu when we came back.

“What in the world was that? And why?” Master Shizu asked.

The old woman took it without any hint of surprise, and told us that it’s a common occurrence.

“A long time ago, there was a stone quarry in this area. The whole place is full of cavities. That’s why it’s not surprising for a place to vanish just like that.”

“……. There’s no way to prevent it?”

“We do not have blueprints of the old quarry, and no one is willing to investigate it…” The old woman looked a little troubled as she said this. Then she went on, “Well, it’s not a big deal. The one you’ve seen earlier, of house and people being swallowed, is a rare thing. The empty

hole will just have to be filled in. The ground caves in only a few times every month. It’s not something to worry about.”

“……”

As the old woman replaced Master Shizu’s cold tea, she asked, “Oh, right. Mister traveler, what are you going to do from now on? If you want to live in this country, shouldn’t you already be looking for a place where you can build your house?”

Master Shizu shook his head with a somewhat twitchy smile.

And then he asked where he could immediately obtain portable rations and fuel for the buggy.

“Land of Prophecies” — We NO the Future. —[8]

Chapter Seven

"Land of Prophecies"

— We NO the Future.—

Inside a forest, there was a single road.

It was a dark forest, dense with tall conifers. The earth was damp and overgrown with ferns.

A path ran perfectly straight from east to west, as if cutting through the forest. It was a wide road. The remains of the stone paving laid out a long time ago stretched on, its gray surface full of cracks.

A single, tiny tree sprout grew out from the gap opened by the cracks.

It was a seed that was transported some way or the other, fell on top of the soil in the crack by chance, and grew.

The tiny bud that sprouted from the seed was illuminated by the bright sunlight that was streaming in, unhindered, in the middle of the road.

On this road ran a lone motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly).

The motorrad’s front and rear wheels trampled on the tiny sprout.

It passed there in an instant, without leaving any trace.

The motorrad ran westward on the cracked road.

Boxes were attached on both sides of its rear wheel, on top of which was a bag as well as a sleeping bag. A silver cup dangled from the bag, shaking from the minute vibrations of the vehicle.

Its rider was a young person, around mid-teens.

She was wearing a black jacket fastened with a wide belt on the waist. On her right thigh was a holster for a hand persuader (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol) containing a revolver. There was also an automatic-type behind her waist.

On top of her short black hair was a hat. It resembled a pilot's hat, with a brim at front and ear flaps on both sides. Strapped on it was a pair of silver-framed goggles that was peeled in places.

Eventually, the rider tapped the motorrad's tank.

"I see it," the rider said.

—

Inside the forest, there was a green wall.

It was the tall wall surrounding a country. It drew an elegant curve with a smooth upward arc protruding to the outside. Its sides were lined up with pillars placed on equal intervals, and was completely covered with a dense growth of dark green ivy.

The motorrad stopped from a place where the entirety of the wall could be seen.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen walls like this,” the rider said, still straddled on the motorrad.

“Yeah, it’s amazing. Its structure is also unusual,” the motorrad agreed.

After this, the rider silently stared at the wall for a while.

“What’s the matter, Kino?” the motorrad asked.

A light smile lingered underneath the goggles of the rider who was called Kino.

“That I would be able to see such things, that I would come this far… A long time ago… I wouldn’t even dream of it as a child. But saying that after all this time feels a bit…”

“Hmm. Well, no one knows what the future holds. As they say, ‘the lesson ahead is on underworld’.”

“… ‘The road ahead is an unknown world’[9]?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

With this, the motorrad fell silent.

“I wonder if it’s the right thing… or not…,” Kino muttered. “Well, let’s get going, Hermes.”

The motorrad called Hermes answered, “Okay.”

Kino hit the gears, and they slowly rode towards the gates.

"The world… is going to end?"

"The world is going to end. At the dawn of the day after tomorrow." The female immigration examiner answered Kino's question, and continued, "But if you still want to, we'll grant you a three-day stay. That is, if you wish to face the end of the world in our country…"

Kino looked at the female examiner's serious expression.

The calm and collected female examiner in her late twenties sat alone inside the room at the middle of the thick walls.

"You say the world is going to end, but how is that going to happen?"

"We don't know that."

"Huh?"

"But everything in this world is going to end, including our lives of course. It can't be helped. It's definite. Absolute. Inevitable," the examiner answered gently.

"Um… How did you know?" Kino asked.

"That's a very good question," the female examiner nodded, and answered with confidence,

"Because of the prophecy."

—

Immediately upon passing through the gates, the town illuminated by the evening sun could be seen with one sweep of the eye.

The blurry haze of the wall at the other end could be seen; a gigantic circular wall inclined towards the gentle slope to the center of the country. Wide roads stretched out radially, with alternating farmlands and residential

areas in between. There was much greenery left, orderly lined up with houses made of logs with brick chimneys that stand out. Several big buildings and a lake shining golden from the light could be seen at the center.

"The interior is also nice."

Hermes agreed to Kino's remark, and said, "Yeah, those log houses are quite pretty. The arrangement, which made use of the terrain, was also well done. —— However, this will all end on the day after tomorrow. Because of the prophecy."

"Prophecy, eh…," Kino muttered.

The female examiner didn't give any explanation as to what the prophecy was, and who told them about it. With a philosophical air, she repeated and reassured them that the world will be destroyed. There's nothing that could be done about it, as it was based on a completely accurate prophecy.

And then she started to cry all of a sudden. After that, it was futile to try and ask her about anything, so Kino gave up and passed through the open gates.

"What are we going to do, Kino?"

"For the meantime, maybe we should look for a place to stay. Let's ask someone," Kino said as she went astride Hermes. Without starting the engine, she lightly kicked off the ground and descended the slope. Like this, she directed Hermes towards a nearby street.

It was a wide street lined up with shops on both sides. However, none of these shops was open, and there was no hustle and bustle of people. There was not a single vehicle running on the street.

"It reminds me of a country in mourning," Hermes said.

They noticed an old man seated on top of a wooden box, gaze fixed at the dim sky. They asked where they could find a hotel. The old man said nothing and only pointed at a relatively large building a bit ways off.

When they reached the hotel, they knocked at the closed entrance. After some time, the middle-aged owner came out with surprise painted on his face.

After hearing out Kino, the man spoke, "Oh, so you're a traveler who came just now…. It's true that my house is a hotel…" Then he asked until when they planned to stay

in the country. When Kino answered his question, "The day after tomorrow…? Ah, so your journey will end in this country, huh? That's too bad."

The owner told them the same thing as the immigration examiner.

Kino told him that it didn't matter, so the owner guided them to an elegant and spacious room. He opened the closed sliding door and wiped off the dust on top of a desk. When Kino asked for the cost of the room,

"There's no need for that. The world is about to end, so money is useless. Please enjoy your stay," the owner said and left.

Kino unloaded the luggage from Hermes. Then she took off her own jacket and sprawled herself across the bed.

"The world is going to end the day after tomorrow, they say… What could that 'prophecy' be all about?"

By the time Hermes asked, Kino was already fast asleep.

The next morning.

Kino woke up at dawn.

She lightly moved her body and performed the maintenance on the revolver she called ‘Canon’ and the automatic she called ‘Woodsman’. She then took a shower after practicing her quick draw several times.

Kino ate her breakfast of portable rations while looking at the sun rising from the walls.

Then she slapped Hermes awake and went out sightseeing. She slowly rode through the town.

At the main street, the dispirited people sat dazedly in chairs in front of the shops. They looked at Kino and Hermes, then averted their gazes disinterestedly.

“What’s the matter with them?” Hermes muttered.

“Everybody’s so lifeless… except for a few.”

Kino suddenly stopped Hermes at the middle of the road. She quickly kicked down his side stand.

"Hmm? Why is th—— Whoa!" Hermes exclaimed as he noticed.

From the side of the road, a young man holding a metal pipe ran towards Hermes. His eyes were bloodshot . The people around looked on in surprise.

Kino stood before the man who brandished his weapon overhead. The man aimed for Kino and swung down the metal pipe.

Kino twisted her body and sent out a low kick. It connected with the man's legs. The man fell forward, his body hitting the road.

Kino stepped on the collapsed man's hands and took away the metal pipe. Then she pushed on the man's back strongly.

The man faced to the side and shouted at Kino.

"Damn it! I'll kill you! Damn it!"

"What's his problem——" Hermes muttered.

"Damn… damn…"

The man was sobbing. A middle-aged man among the onlookers spoke to Kino.

"Miss traveler, I'm very sorry. We'll deal with him and won't let him do any more foolish things, so can you set free that young man?"

"……"

Kino looked at the apologetic faces of the people around her. Then, she moved away the metal pipe from the young man's back. As directed by the middle-aged man, the young man, who was still crying, was carried off.

"I'm very sorry. Recently, there were many young ones who started to act violently out of despair…. Your skills really came in handy. We are truly sorry," the middle-aged man apologized.

"Could it be because of the end of the world?" Kino asked.

The man nodded. "That's correct. The young ones felt strongly that they have not yet done everything in their

lives. They couldn’t accept it…. But it couldn’t be helped. I too have resigned myself to this fate, yet I’m still scared. ”

“Hey, what’s that prophecy about, anyway?” Hermes asked. The man slightly taken aback,

“What, so you didn’t know?”

“Yes. If you can, please tell us about it,” Kino said, and the man guided them to a nearby shop.

—

The shop in the dining hall was lined up with tables and chairs made out of logs. The people who had nothing to do and had gathered there looked at Kino and Hermes. As the lights were not turned on, it was dim, and only the quiet rotation of the ceiling fan was noticeable. At the counter, bottles of liquor were placed for everyone to drink whenever they wish.

The man introduced Kino and Hermes. Kino sat in a chair and Hermes was propped beside her on his center stand.

“It seems that miss traveler here doesn’t know the full story behind the prophecy,” the man said. The people around murmured in surprise. They began to speak as though they were having fun.

“If that’s the case, then an accurate explanation is in order.” “Without knowing the reason, you can’t come into terms with the fact that the world is going to end.” “I agree. This person even took the pains to face the end of the world in our country.” “We should also explain to her about our country’s excellent scholar.” “Let me in, too.”

They assembled around, carrying their seats.

“If I may be so bold, I’ll tell you the story,” the man who served as their guide spoke as he faced Kino. Then he told the people around him to point out any mistakes.

"First, let me tell you about our great book of prophecies, and the person who deciphered it — the scholar our country is very proud of," the man said, and the people around nodded.

"Book of prophecies?"

"What kind of book?"

Kino and Hermes asked.

"It's a pity, but it is unknown as to who and when it was written. All we know is that it's a book containing very strange words, and that it was published a long time ago in some country. Its incoherent writing style would make one think that it was a diary made by someone insane. But the truth is… it's a book of prophecies that accurately predicts the dreadful fate of this world. And the person who saw through it, and was successful in deciphering it, is our country's great scholar , the priest of the southern district," the man answered.

"How did you know that it contained prophecies?" Kino asked.

"Forty years ago, the priest investigated that book out of a half-hearted interest, and discovered a dreadful thing. The number of pages and lines correspond to the year and month of a certain incident, which was then described by the text using metaphors and characters rearranged into code. To his dismay, the priest deciphered other pages… and then…," the man took a big breath.

"And he discovered many, many, many, many, many more similar prophecies…," the man said seriously as if he had just discovered it himself. The people around him gasped.

Kino looked around, then asked, "What makes it so definite?"

Not only the man, but the people around answered one after another.

"One hundred and ninety-eight years ago, this country was struck by a severe famine. It was written there…"

"It was precisely stated there how our king 122 years ago would suddenly die from a mysterious illness. Even the fact that it was a disease that makes the nose fall off!"

“There was also that enormous chestnut harvest that troubled us 87 years ago! That was also foreseen by the book! How frightening…”

“There’s also that prediction about the queen mother fracturing her foot from falling off a horse 143 years ago. ”

“It also accurately described that it will rain on the day of the bloodless revolution that would throw away the monarchy, 54 years ago; as well as the fact that the king would spend the rest of his life as a gardener!”

“Also, about the great flood brought about by heavy rains on the autumn 44 years ago. The water in the lake could not be used for half a year. The number of characters even revealed the water level!”

“That fire in the northern district 25 years ago. Not only did it predict that it will happen, the number of houses burned down was also written. And about the 89-year old grandma living there, too! When I heard about that, it sent shivers down my spine!”

“That on the winter 23 years ago, twelve wanderers would drift by our country, was also magnificently

predicted. And it also foretold that the name of the sole immigrant among those vulgar people who would obtain permanent residency would start with 'te'… It made big news that time."

"Nineteen years ago, a chemist wearing a blue shirt killed many people by mixing up poison. That was also prophesied, down to the color of the person's shirt…"

"The hail that fell early in the summer ten years ago that sent a huge blow to farming families; I remember it so well…"

"That's not all! Even the syrup we make from the sap of the trees——"

For a while, each person would speak, continuing as long as he wished.

"Um… Did the prophecies occur after the priest discovered that they are going to happen?" Kino asked.

The man shook his head matter-of-factly. "No. After they have occurred, the priest would soon discover that it was prophesied."

"Huh? Then that means he could interpret it as much as he——"

Hermes' speech was interrupted by Kino's kick to his engine.

"I see. I understand up to this point. And what about tomorrow's prophecy?"

The man's and everybody's faces clouded once more upon hearing Kino's question.

"The prophecy for tomorrow… was written as the last sentence of that book. According to the priest, it was written this way: 'After the night the nineteenth full moon passes through the sky, the world will end at the rising of the sun. There is nothing we could do except to smash the green plate.' The green plate here refers to our custom of giving a green plate as a birthday present. This means, 'There will be no more births. There is nothing we could do but mourn.'"

"Then, in that book's 'afterword——"

Hermes' speech was interrupted by Kino's kick to his frame.

The man spoke. "It was around thirty years ago when this prophecy became evident. It seems the priest hesitated to announce it, but in the end, he decided that he could not deceive us and made it known to the public …"

"It must have been quite a surprise."

"Ah, everyone spent a month in lamentation. However , there's no doubt about the accuracy of the prophecy, so we could only resign ourselves to our fate. The priest's words were 'to live life to the fullest until that day comes '. But among us, there were some who despised 'the future' as a result…," the man said.

A middle-aged woman drinking behind him spoke. " And that's already tomorrow…. Time flows so quickly. Soon, the only thing left for us to do is to gather and drown ourselves in alcohol."

"Don't say that…," another person said gloomily.

"Even if we were told 'to live life to the fullest until that day comes', it's not really a simple thing to look for something to live for…. It's really sad."

"I see…," Kino nodded meekly.

"What are you going to do, miss traveler? There's only a day left though," the man asked.

"I guess I'll do some shopping," Kino answered.

—

"The world is going to end tomorrow, so what are you planning to do with the stuff you got?"

The shopkeeper who came out from the interior of the variety store where Kino was shopping asked.

"Well, just in case the prophecy doesn't come true, I suppose," Hermes said. The shopkeeper nodded with a look of comprehension.

"Yeah, I understand what you mean…"

"Really?"

"You still couldn't believe that the world is going to end. That's understandable. I was the same a long time ago. But with that much proof, saying 'I don't believe' or 'It's unbelievable' are no longer possible. I have given up, and I have no choice but to spend the remaining time efficiently."

"I see. Well, I'll continue shopping then. I don't have the chance to do this often, you know."

"Well, that's also good. I'll give you a ten percent discount on all items here. Take as much as you want. No , it's better if you take away everything. I'll feel more relieved that way."

"Nope. I'm fine with what I could carry. That knife over there looks nice. Can you show it to me?"

—

"Miss traveler, won't you join us in prayer? … It may calm you down a bit."

Kino was invited by a resident as she was taking her dinner in the cafeteria.

Kino politely refused, and went back to the hotel. The owner was praying with his family.

—

The next morning. That is, the third day since Kino entered the country.

Kino woke up at the crack of dawn.

A thin mist wrapped the whole country. However, for some reason, the calm of the morning was missing. Lights shining from the houses, as well as people running through the streets could be seen.

As Kino was about to start her persuader training, Hermes woke up on his own, giving her a surprise.

“Kino, the world is going to end soon. I woke up because I’m looking forward to it.”

Kino answered while wiping Canon with a cloth, “Is that so…? Surprises sure abound just around the corner.”

“Shall we go sightseeing for the last time?” Hermes asked.

“Sure. It’s the end after all,” Kino answered as she returned Canon to its holster. Then with her left hand, she started to practice her quick draw with Woodsman. Hermes remarked,

“The world is going to end soon, so why bother practice?”

—

After working up a sweat, Kino rode Hermes through the town.

The fog has lifted. Amidst the cool air, the sky was bright, blue, and clear.

On the ridge of the lake at center of the country, there was a plaza. Over there, a lot of people have gathered, facing the east, and praying anxiously. They were praying as one.

“It’s about time for the sun to rise,” Hermes said. Some elderly residents nearby trembled.

Along with the amplifying voices in prayer, the tolling of a large bell began to echo. It pealed madly again and again. The rays of the sun began to reach the spire of a tall building.

Soon, the dazzling sun emerged from the walls.

The people shrieked in anguish, and went in an uproar .

Kino spoke. “It’s a nice morning.”

“Yup. Let’s ride today as usual,” Hermes agreed happily.

When the sun has completely shown itself, and after about three more minutes, the prayers and lamentation of the residents stopped and turned into unrest, which turned into jeering.

“Nothing happened?” “Has the world ended already? ” “Everybody’s still alive!” “The sun has completely risen , too…” “What’s happening——” “How could this be?” “ Nothing?” “Damn! Could it be…” “Is it possible…” “— —The prophecy… has not come to pass?”

“It’s the priest!” someone shouted.

A black car stopped, and a man wearing stiff clothing headed to the center of the plaza while being surrounded by attendants. It was a middle-aged man with a virtuous expression.

The residents followed him silently with their eyes. Kino and Hermes observed the crowd from behind.

“U-uh, t-to everyone gathered here…”

The tense voice of the priest, whose face looked as if he was having cramps somewhere, came out from a megaphone. The residents who became quiet for a moment simultaneously gave him piercing glances.

"T-the weather today is great, isn't it——"

"Enough of that! Sir! What has become of the prophecy ?!" someone interrupted with a shout.

"A-about that——"

"C-could it be that all of it was a lie?!" another person said.

"N-no. I would never make up a lie…. It was true that those were the last words in the book…"

"Then what's the meaning of this?! Everyone believed what you said, and thought that the world would end today——" screamed a young woman, who broke down crying right where she stood.

"T-that's… you know…," the befuddled priest mixed up his words, as he fumbled for an explanation. Then all

of a sudden, "Ah, yes! That's right! That's true, everyone! The world has ended! The world has already ended!" the priest bellowed to the top of his voice in the megaphone.

Kino looked at the priest, and at the people, whose eyes were wide in surprise.

The priest, who was speaking to the megaphone held in front of him by his attendant, spread his arms without hesitation, his clothing trailing in the morning wind.

"Everyone, please listen!" He began his passionate speech directed to everyone. "I, as well as everybody here, believed that the world is going to end! That the world will end at the rising of the sun, as was written! Yes! Yes! That's true! And it was correct! Because! Because! The world we believed to be so! That is, 'the world that we thought would end because of the prophecy' has ended indeed! Inside everyone's hearts, a world has ended! And once again, a new world has begun! Yes! ——The prophecy was right!"

Several seconds of silence passed.

And then, a storm of jeering followed, like a tempest devastating a lake.

Kino and Hermes observed the mayhem for a while.

The angry citizens tried to attack the priest, but the attendants as well as the ardent believers stopped them desperately, and in one way or the other, prevented bloodshed.

Even the people who were throwing all sorts of terrible insults towards the priest had relieved expressions on their faces. There were people crying and embracing each other.

The shopkeeper Kino met the day before found her and talked to her.

“Isn’t it great? The world has not yet ended,” Kino said. The shopkeeper laughed awkwardly,

“By the way, about the stuff I sold you yesterday…”

"Yes. I'll use them with great care. They make great souvenirs from this country," Kino replied with a smile, and the shopkeeper left with a dry smile on his face.

The priest, whose shoulders were already limp, tried to escape the plaza stealthily with his attendants. As they tried to board the car, the priest suddenly lifted his face.

It was a face distorted in fear.

The priest suddenly moved. He snatched away the megaphone held by a person nearby.

"E-everyone! Please listen!" He shouted with all his might. Everyone looked at the source of the voice, and their faces contorted in disgust.

"E-e-e-e-everyone! I-it's not today! I noticed it just now ! I realized it just now! It's very important! Please listen! Please listen to me!"

As an attendant tried to stop him, the priest continued to yell out.

"T-the world is going to end! I made a mistake! 'After the night the nineteenth full moon passes through the

sky’! I just realized it last night! It was wrong! It was a mistake! Everyone, don’t you remember?! Four full moons ago, wasn’t there a lunar eclipse?! Didn’t the moon disappear?! It was wrong! We should only count the nights when ‘a full moon crosses the sky’! Ugh! * Cough*!”

The priest choked. He continued desperately, “That’s why! Indeed the world has not ended today! The truth is it will end on the sunrise after the next full moon! At that time, our world will really come to an end! Everyone! You should acknowledge this!” the priest declared boldly . A nearby man quickly snatched away the megaphone,

“Is that so?!” he said to the priest. And continued, “ Everyone! We no longer have to believe in these prophecies! No one knows the future! That is the truth!”

There was applause.

The dumbfounded priest was dragged by his attendants, and vanished inside the car. The car drove away and disappeared.

“Well, it’s about time for us to leave,” said Kino.

—

Kino and Hermes departed from the western gate.

She looked one last time at the strange walls, then rode through the path.

Kino and Hermes climbed the gently-sloping mountain. When she looked back once, the country already looked small.

“Three people,” Hermes suddenly spoke while running. Kino nodded silently.

Kino stopped Hermes right in the middle of the road. Without turning off his engine, she propped him on his center stand. There was forest on both sides.

“Who might you be? There’s no need to conceal yourselves,” Kino spoke loudly without removing her hat or goggles.

The presence of people moving inside the forest was felt, and then.

“Well, that was rude of us!”

A voice replied. Two men came out, pushing through ferns. The men who looked around thirty were dressed in clothes like that of a traveler or a woodcutter. One of them spoke with a smile.

“Indeed, hiding ourselves only make us suspicious. Are you a traveler?”

“Yes. Is the other person not among you?” Kino asked.

“… No, he’ll come out soon,” the two answered.

A man resembling the other two came out from the forest. Together, they introduced themselves as citizens of a country across the mountain range.

Hermes asked, “What are you doing in this kind of place? Are you collectors of weird stuff, or something?”

The three looked at each other. And then,

“Miss traveler, mister motorrad, can you keep a secret? We have an interesting story to tell you…”

"No I can't, so I'll pass. Bye then." As Kino was about to ride Hermes, the three stopped her in a panic.

"Well, don't say that. It's a really interesting story. It would make a great souvenir for your travels, don't you think? … The truth is we are a scouting party from a country seven mountains across here. We disguised ourselves as woodcutters, and observe the travelers coming out from that country."

"Why?" Hermes asked, his engine still turned on. The three grinned,

"Along with the rising of the sun after the descent of the next full moon, we will invade that country and kill everyone."

"Eh?"

"What do you mean?" Kino asked calmly.

"It's exactly as you heard. On the next full moon, as soon as the sun rises, we will invade that country and kill every single one of its residents without leaving a single

one alive. Then we will destroy it thoroughly. We have to make sure that not a single thing remains of that country. "

"Why why why?" Hermes asked in surprise, then he added, "——because of the prophecy?"

The three were startled at the same time. They exchanged glances, and then,

"Yes! Exactly! Because of the prophecy! … You sure know a lot!"

"What do you mean?" Kino repeated her question.

The three, who suddenly became in the mood to chat, answered, "There was a certain prophecy in our country. A long time ago, a prophet left a book of prophecies. Twenty years ago, a man immigrated in our country and succeeded in deciphering the book. It predicted terrible things. Floods, epidemics, accidents, and disasters up until now, were all guessed correctly. As soon as something happened, that scholar would show it to us and say, 'See, as I thought it was here. The number of pages and lines correspond to the year and month it occurred.'"

“……”

“……”

“And you know, the very end of that book predicts the end of the world! We were horrified by it, but the sole and flawless way to avoid it was also written there!”

“What is it?” Hermes asked.

“The final chapter of the book says this: ‘After the nineteenth full moon shines in the evening sky, the world will end at the rising of the sun. The one and only road left for us is to smash the green plate.’ This refers to the nineteenth full moon this year; that is, next month’s full moon. At the same time as the rising of the sun after that, the world will end. But—— the other half of the prophecy tells us of a way to avoid it: ‘smashing the green plate’ is the only way.”

“And so, that country…”

The three nodded.

“Yes. You must have seen it yourself, miss traveler. That country had unusual walls and a gentle depression towards the center. It was the green plate. As expected of him, our scholar noticed that. He’s truly brilliant.”

“But isn’t wiping them out going overboard?”

“That’s outrageous, mister motorrad! Destroying that country is necessary to save the world. This is not only our problem. If the world ends, you too will vanish. According to our scholar, since it was not clearly stated how much we should ‘smash the plate’, we should do it thoroughly. I believe so too. In order to save this world, us, who knows the method, have to do what we can. ——The day after the nineteenth full moon. On our astronomer’s judgment, that will be the next full moon, that is, without counting the lunar eclipse. It’s going to happen soon. About this time, our country should be finalizing the preparations.”

“I see…,” Kino muttered. And then, “Thanks for the story. We’ll have to excuse ourselves now.”

At that moment, the three quickly stood in front of Kino as if trying to surround her.

"Say, do you think we can just let you go home upon learning this much? If you return to that country and tell them about this, it will be troublesome. We will not be able to save the world. As a souvenir for your travel to the underworld, please do not forget about the prophecy, and about us."

The three took out machetes from behind their hips, and attacked instantaneously from three sides.

Kino fell backwards like a plank that lost its support. The three blades cut nothing but air. Kino lay on the road face up, Canon in her right hand and Woodsman in her left.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

The dry sounds continued without pause, and the three heavy, loud explosive sounds that followed reverberated in rhythm.

The three, who had tiny holes and big holes opened in their throats, collapsed.

Kino got up.

—

“… That was unexpected.”

While stuffing bullets and liquid gunpowder inside Canon, Kino spoke. “That I would be able to deal with trouble like this, that I would be this good in using persuaders… A long time ago… I wouldn’t have imagined as much when I first met Master. But saying that after all this time feels a bit…”

“No one knows what the future holds. Like they say, ‘ the road ahead is an unknown world.’”

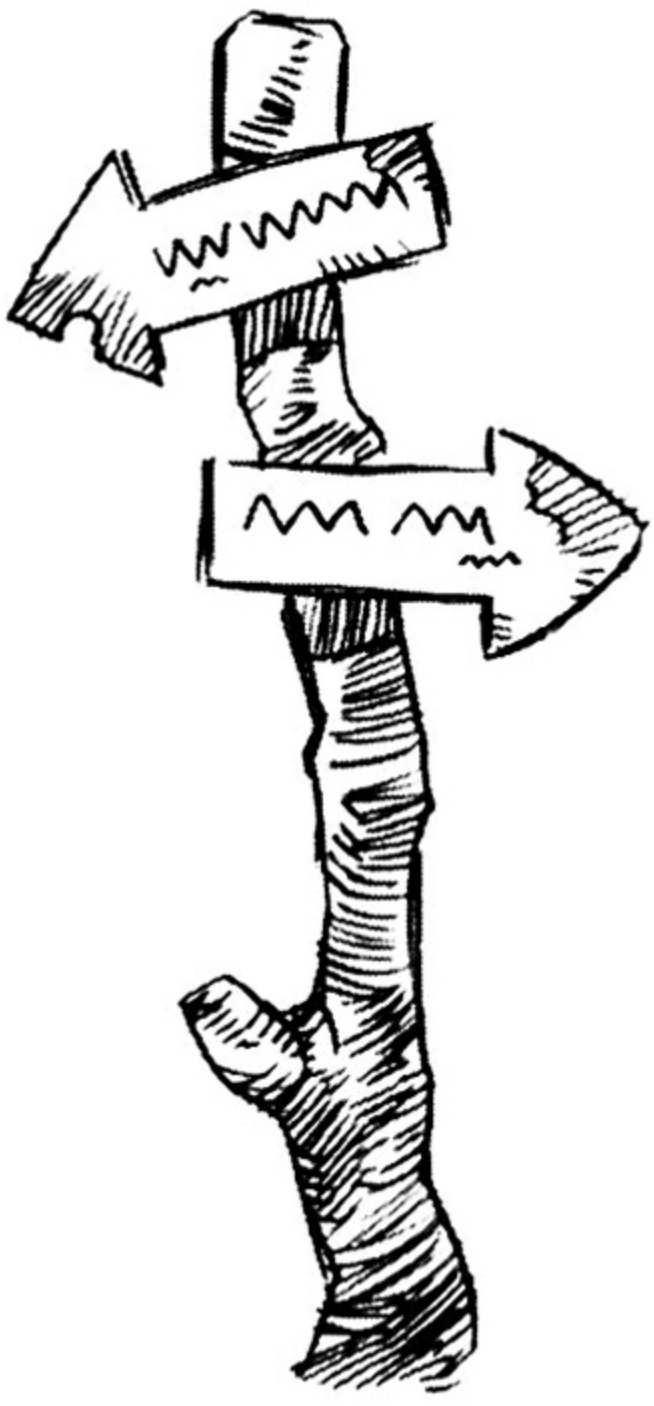
“I wonder if it’s right thing… or not…?” Kino tilted her head as she finished loading. Then she returned Canon to its holster.

Kino looked around to check if she has forgotten anything. There was nothing, other than the three machetes, and the three corpses.

“Shall we go then? ——I have no idea what awaits us though,” Kino said as she went astride Hermes.

“Ro-ger,” Hermes answered.

Kino started the engine.



“Bodyguards” — Stand-bys —

Chapter Eight

"Bodyguards"

— Stand-bys —

There was a country with great, big gates.

Inside its gates, there was a facility built for the sole purpose of resupplying fuel and water. Right there an enormous trailer truck was parked.

A bumper guard was positioned in front of the protruding engine of the trailer head, whose job was to send flying and kill any living creature that happened to pass before it. Behind was the driver’s seat, as well as the makeshift sleeping cabin of several people. The workers were supplying this ‘mobile home’ with fuel, water and food.

Behind the trailer head were four long, box-shaped, pallet cars connected with each other. They were like train freight cars with eight wheels on each side, but without any windows.

At the center of the roof of the first pallet car, there were handrails and a passage for people to walk on. Over there, one woman was standing.

It was a youthful woman with long, black hair. She was comfortably, yet elegantly dressed, with a high-caliber revolver suspended from her right hip. A

rifle-type persuader (Note: A gun) is also slung on her back.

On top of the next car, there was a man. It was a young man who was a bit on the short side, but with a handsome face. On his left hip was a slim automatic-type hand persuader, and he was holding a high-caliber rifle with a drum magazine.

“Master,” the man spoke to the woman, prompting her to look below, “It’s the young lady.”

Standing beside the trailer head was a small girl wearing a red dress. She looked up at the woman with a scowl.

The woman walked up to the roof of the trailer head and climbed down its ladder. She approached the girl who continued to glare at her, and crouched down until their eyes are at the same level.

“Hello,” the woman spoke.

“Are you two the bodyguards this time?” the girl asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” the woman said with a smile and a nod.

And then the girl spat out, “We don’t need bodyguards!”

“How come?” the woman asked gently.

The girl sputtered, looking straight ahead. “You see, a person’s life and destiny is decided by God. If we are supposed to die, that is something God has decided on, you know. And you see, you people are getting in the way——”

“Then is it okay with you if you and everybody here were to die?”

“If it is fated,” the girl said firmly.

“Even so, it is our job to protect your lives,” the woman replied without changing her kind expression.

The trailer ran through the wilderness. Looking around, one could see the glaring sun, the blue sky, and the dry, reddish earth and rocks sparsely covered by grass.

The driver was replaced while the trailer was running. It has been going on since morning without making a single stop. The dusty region continued far across the distance.

At the roof of the pallet cars, the two bodyguards looked around, still holding their persuaders. They were wearing goggles and lifelines hooked to the car handrails .

A little past noon,

“Master! Ten o’clock!” the male bodyguard cried to the woman. The man immediately positioned his rifle.

Twenty cars were approaching the front of the trailer diagonally from the left, raising dust behind them. The ones riding the small, modified buggies were all men, and of course, they all have persuaders.

The trailer sped up. A black smoke rose from its chimney and the trailer dashed forward ready to knock over any car standing on its way.

The attackers surrounded the trailer and started firing intermittently. The bullets bounced off the pallet cars. The male bodyguard placed his rifle on the rolled cushion atop the handrail, and positioned to fire.

An empty cartridge flied out along with the thunderous roar of the rifle. The man fired one shot. Steam sprayed up from one of the vehicles, and eventually stopped. Three cars were brought down in quick succession. The other vehicles distanced away to escape from the accurate snipes of the man.

At that time, the trailer dropped its speed to avoid a hole in the ground. Its huge form wriggled like a snake. One car took this opportunity to approach the trailer. As the sparks from the collision scattered, a man jumped towards the trailer head and grabbed the ladder.

“I’ll do something about it.” The female bodyguard went towards the trailer head, sliding down the hook of her lifeline.

The man climbed the ladder. The window of the trailer head opened and someone leaned out. The man was ready to defend himself when he realized that it was only a little girl.

“Come here!”

He grabbed her roughly by the collar and dragged her with one hand through the window. The girl, with a distressed expression, was forcefully raised up the roof.

From the top of the pallet car, the female bodyguard, while aiming her revolver, spoke to the man who was holding the girl’s side with his right hand and pointing a revolver to her head with his left.

“Please stop.”

“You’re just in time. Woman! Go to the driver’s seat and stop this trailer!” the man shouted. The trailer sped up once again, and the wind’s noise became more intense .

“Hurry! Or else, I’ll blow up this brat’s head!” The man poked the girl’s head with the barrel. As if it was a signal, the expressionless girl’s face changed color. Her eyes widened and she turned pale.

“No—! I don’t want to die! No! No! I don’t want to die! Help me!” the girl screamed. She shook her head wildly, and teardrops fell from her face.

“It can’t be helped,” the woman said calmly.

She returned the revolver in her holster. She removed her lifeline hook and moved to the roof of the trailer head . And then, she passed right beside the two.

“Please save me…” were the only words the girl whose face was soggy with tears managed to say. The woman smiled sweetly.

“Hurry up!” The man changed the aim of his revolver from the girl’s head to the woman.

In the next moment, the woman was holding the revolver’s cylinder. The gun wouldn’t fire even if he pulled the trigger because the hammer wouldn’t raise. At the same time as the man’s expression changed, several holes opened up in his shoulder. Deep red liquid oozed from the holes.

“?”

The man looked at his right shoulder with a dumbstruck expression. The woman took back the girl from the man’s powerless arms with ease. Located two cars behind, the male bodyguard was aiming his square-barreled automatic-type hand persuader. He fired one more time.

The bullet followed its aim to the man’s knee. His body staggered as his leg lost its bending force. And then the man slipped and fell down from the roof of the trailer head. The man’s face registered disbelief in what just happened for nearly two seconds before he was smashed on the ground.

The fallen man’s legs and arms rotated and bent into a strange angle before he disappeared into the dust.

The woman leered at the attackers’ cars as they all escaped, while the girl sobbed bitterly in her arms.

—

The next morning.

The trailer safely passed through the gates of a big country. It stopped beside a square near the gates.

Soon, one worker began to unload the luggage. The doors of the pallet cars opened, and a chain was pulled out by a small car. What came out were humans who were tied together with their necks and arms, like a string of beads.

All were covered with vomit and feces. Another worker sprayed water on their heads using a hose. The chains were skillfully removed from the ones who can no longer walk, and they were dragged towards the edge of an enormous hole on the side. The back of their heads were shot with a persuader, and they were rolled and dropped into the hole.

The two travelers received their luggage as they spoke to the married couple who owned the trailer, along with their only daughter.

The owner thanked the two, smiling from ear-to-ear and shaking their hands.

The small girl wearing a red dress shyly pressed against her mother’s back.

The girl spoke to the female bodyguard who crouched before her. “… Thank you for saving me,” she said with a small, but clear voice.

The female bodyguard replied with the same gentle expression as before. “You’re welcome. However, it’s not because of me. I’m sure your God thought that it was yet too early for you to die.”

The girl threw her arms around the female bodyguard. The woman put her arms around her small back, and gently patted it. A gunshot was heard.[10]

The female bodyguard asked the owner if they wanted to be escorted home. The owner said that there will be no problem as they will be taking a detour unknown to the attackers after emptying their cargo. Then he asked the two if they wanted to hitch a ride.

The woman asked about the route, but turned down his offer, with the excuse that they have to return right away.

—

"I understand the route. I thank you in advance."

A man was speaking to the two ex-bodyguards.

This man, along with all the others who were glaring at the two, was part of the group that attacked the trailer. The man who stepped up was their leader, and this place hidden in the mountains was their hideout.

"Then, we will be taking the payment," the woman said.

"Wait," said the leader. "You killed one of our comrades. Why?" he asked, glaring at the woman.

“Because the job I accepted was to find out the homeward route of that trailer. It was necessary. Besides, things didn’t work out as planned,” the woman said matter-of-factly. They could almost hear the sound of molar-grinding from the men around them.

The leader spoke. “He was a brave man, loved by everybody. My younger brother, the only family I have left after they were killed by those bastards.”

“Is that so?” The woman said without hesitation, and the men around them raised the weapons in their hands. While all of them glared at the woman, the male bodyguard beside her removed his jacket.

“Phew, it’s so hot in here,” the man said, revealing his body covered with a number of square, clay-like, plastic explosives. The place became quiet all of a sudden.

“That’s enough…. Take this with you. We were supposed to anyway.”

After examining the payment handed to her, the woman turned away.

—

The man and the woman were riding on a small, battered car through the wilderness. The barrel of the rifle, which couldn’t fit inside the car, was protruding through the window.

The woman was driving while the man was eating the unsavory clay-like portable rations wrapped around his body earlier. He offered them to the woman, who shook her head in reply.

“Master,” said the man.

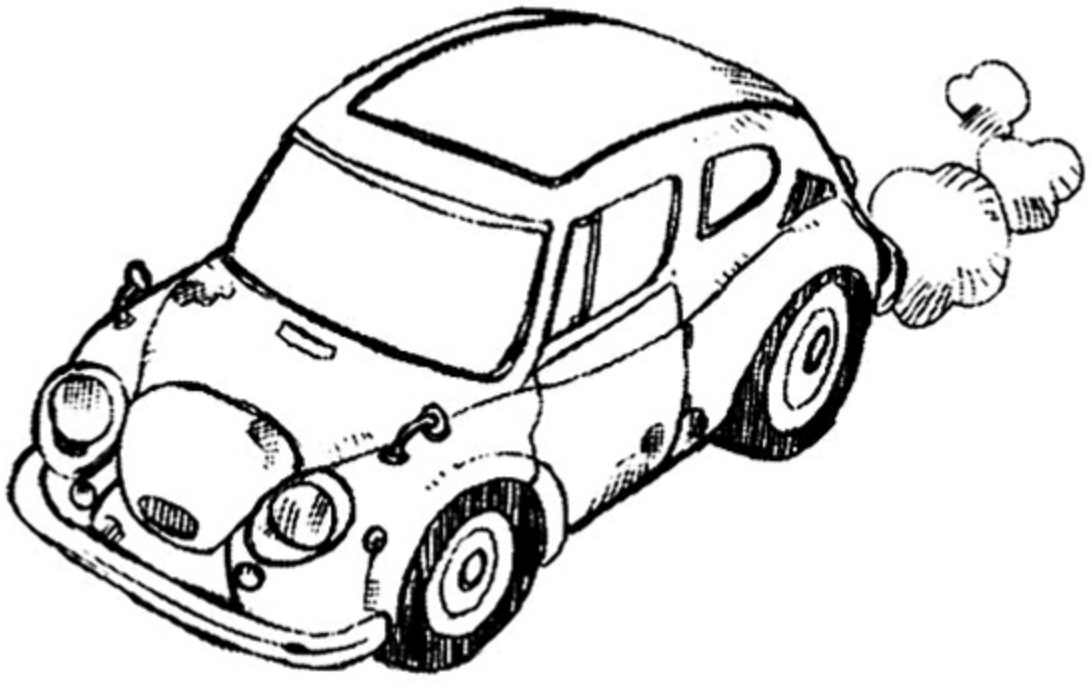
“What is it?”

The man hesitated for a few seconds before asking, “ That trailer will be attacked again, won’t it?”

“That is very likely,” the woman answered in an extremely natural manner.

“Is that all right?” The man asked.

The woman did not answer.

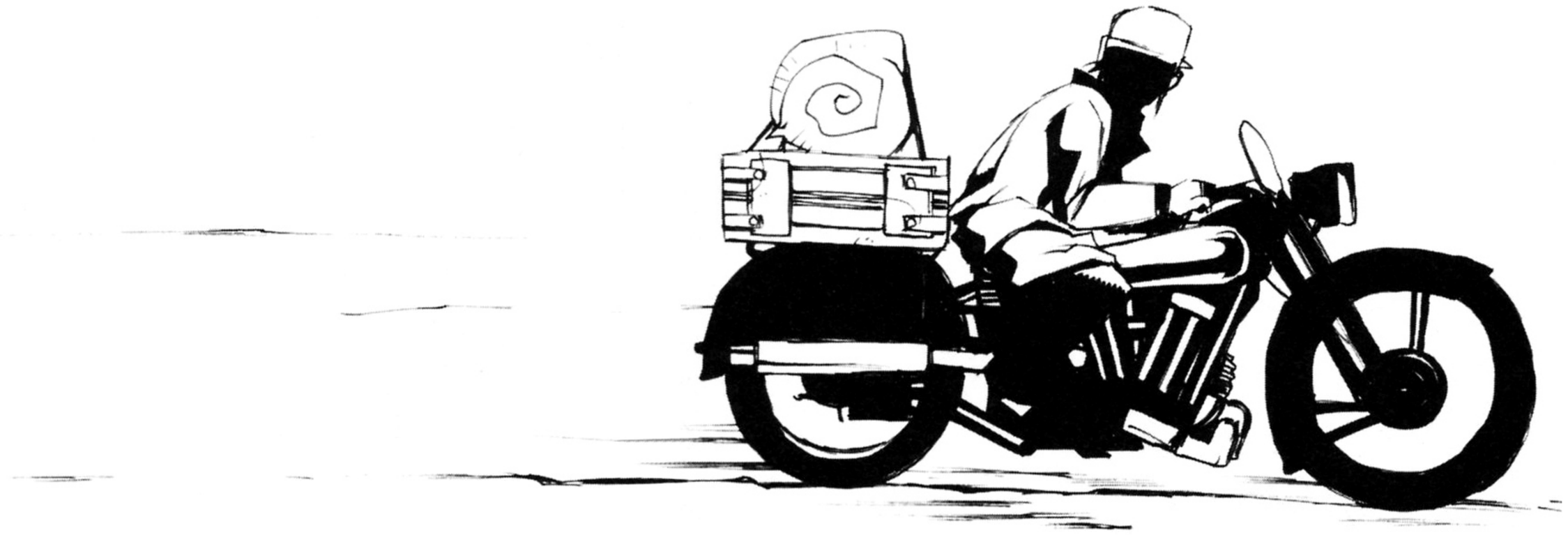


“Tale of a Salt Field” — Family Business —

Chapter Nine

"Tale of a Salt Field"

— Family Business —



A single motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly) was running through a world of white.

It was a flat, dazzling, endless space of pure white.

In this place, the earth was made of salt.

The dried and hardened surface of salt was like a field of snow. East, west, south and north; there was only the white horizon visible in all directions.

The sun was at its zenith, the pale blue sky was cloudless, and the plains shone white below it.

The motorrad was running towards the west on top of the salt field, encountering not a single obstacle. A box was attached on both sides of its rear wheel. A bag, a sleeping bag, cans of fuel and water, and other traveling luggage were loaded on top of its rear carrier.

The rider was wearing a brown coat, the excess hem of which was rolled up to the thighs. She was wearing a hat with flaps covering her ears and yellow single-lens goggles. Her face was covered with a bandana to protect herself from sunburn.

A rifle-type persuader (Note: A gun) was hanging in front of her body with a leather strap. It was a slim rifle with a wooden stock, equipped with a sniper’s scope.

“Kino, behind at seven o’clock,” the motorrad spoke suddenly in a loud voice, so as not to lose to the sound of the engine.

The rider called Kino slackened the accelerator a little and turned her head behind to the left.

“I can’t see it. How far ahead are we?”

“A good deal. Besides, they’re using ordinary horses. They seem to be desperately trying to chase us, but it’s impossible for them to catch up,” said the motorrad.

“If that’s the case, then let’s escape like this.”

“Roger.”

Kino maxed the accelerator. The motorrad accelerated and ran through the salt fields in an unparalleled speed.

“They came just as we thought, Hermes,” said the rider.

“Yeah, they sure did. The info you got was perfect,” the motorrad called Hermes replied.

—

Kino and Hermes rode until sunset.

Because nothing could be seen from afar after dark, they camped out on the empty, white fields.

Kino dug a hole in the hard salt, then, keeping Hermes away, she made a fire at the bottom of it using solid fuel.

With her persuader beside her bed, Kino slept under the sky full of stars.

—

The next day.

Just as the previous day, Kino and Hermes rode towards the western horizon.

The scenery hasn’t changed a bit. The sky was clear and the wind was not blowing. Kino cut the engine to take a break.

And her ears ached from the silence.

Just about noon.

Again, Hermes spoke suddenly while running. “Kino, they’ve come again. Eight o’clock. This time it’s a car.”

Kino turned her head. There was a small dot from afar. It slowly became bigger in view.

“Will they catch up with us?” Kino asked.

“Looks like it. They are faster than us,” Hermes said calmly. Kino looked again.

“What now?” Hermes asked. Kino released her grasp from the handle of the accelerator, and released the safety of her persuader.

“I knew it.”

“It can’t be helped. As to why they would attack a traveler out of the blue, I have no idea. I’d love to know.”

Kino returned her hand to the handle, turned around, and looked at their pursuers.

A white smoke thinly drifted from the car that has gotten much bigger in view.

“Kino, they’re firing!”

“I know. But it’s still far. If they hit me from this distance…”

“If they did?” Hermes asked. Kino smiled a little as she spoke.

“Then today must be a fairly lucky one.”

“This is not a joke. You should return fire immediately, ” Hermes complained in a loud voice.

“Not yet, only a bit more,” was Kino’s only reply.

The distance between them gradually shrank, and smoke rose intermittently from the car. While running, Kino glanced behind to look at the pursuers. Then all of a sudden,

“Okay. Here’s good.”

She slackened the accelerator and turned sharply to the left. They were exposed to the pursuing car straight from the left.

“Kino, you made it easier for them to shoot you, what in the world are you thinking?” Hermes asked.

Kino did not answer, and instead fixed the accelerator, and removed her hands from the handles. She immediately positioned her persuader, aimed and fired in an instant.

The car’s front right tire burst and scattered from the force of its rotation.

Kino immediately returned her hand to the handles and made a big turn to the right.

The car pitched forward, its front right wheel and body scraping the salt ground at length. The driver tried to stop the car, but it overturned to the right, shaking off its passengers ostentatiously.

“It stopped,” said Hermes.

“Well, let’s run away,” Kino accelerated.

—

The next day.

Once again, Kino and Hermes were running on the salt fields.

To the north and south, the tops of mountains were faintly visible like an island emerging from the sea’s horizon. As usual, there was nothing to behold from the west where Kino and Hermes were headed.

—

“There’s something right ahead.”

Around noon, Hermes spoke as he ran.

Kino loosened the accelerator a bit and asked, “What is it?”

“I wonder? Trees standing side by side, maybe. It doesn’t look like there are any humans around,” Hermes said in a slightly worried tone.

A little doubtful, Kino stood up while riding. Eventually, something that looked like a black line became dimly visible from a distance. She approached warily and realized that it was a row of stakes pierced on the ground.

Kino stopped Hermes in front of the stakes.

Each of the wooden stakes was about the height of a child, and the distance between the stakes wouldn’t let a

car pass in between. It has drawn an endless line on the white ground. The line extended from the southeast to the west.

“What could this be?” Hermes asked.

Kino tilted her head. “Who knows? I have no idea at all. Someone’s guideposts perhaps…. But if it were, there ’s no need for them to be stuck too close to each other.”

“You weren’t told anything about this?”

“Nope. I heard that there’s someone who’ll come and attack us, that’s all.”

“Hmm.”

“Well, no matter. Since it’s going west, let’s just run along it.”

Kino launched Hermes.

“Don’t get lost, okay?” Hermes reminded.

While they were running, they saw a man pounding at the stakes.

Hermes soon informed Kino, and she released the safety of her persuader.

A small car was parked just ahead the path Kino was taking, and several stakes were piled up on its carrier. There was an elderly man wearing sunglasses, his face tanned black due to sunburn. The man was hammering down the tops of the stakes. He was hammering with intense concentration.

The man noticed the sound of the engine and turned around. The motorrad came out from the shadow of the car, slid its rear wheel in front of the man and stopped.

“Hello,”

“Hi,”

Kino and Hermes greeted the surprised man.

The man raised the hammer. Then he saw Kino holding a persuader with both hands, and dropped the hammer while gnashing his teeth. The man shouted.

“You wretch! Even if you kill me with that persuader, what’s mine will still be mine! You won’t be able to steal it from me!”

After she was sure that the man was finished shouting, Kino lowered her bandana and spoke. “I don’t have any idea what you are talking about. What is it that you think we were going to take away from you?”

Once again, the man yelled, “What, you’re trying to play innocent now?”

In a polite tone, Kino told the man that she has no intention of hurting him or stealing anything from him, and that he should calm down.

—

“Then, you mean to say that you two were merely travelers using this salt lake instead of a road?”

The man has somewhat settled down, and asked Kino who stood beside Hermes.

“Yes. We have no intention of staying here or taking away anything from here.” Kino slung the persuader on her back and opened the front of her coat.

The man replied in an indifferent tone. “Well, whatever. If that’s what you say. However, don’t you think I deserve an apology from you for trespassing into my private property?”

“Private property?” Hermes asked.

“That’s right. South of this line,” the man pointed at the row of stakes. Kino and Hermes were standing south of the line.

“… Uh, did you just say ‘private’?” Kino asked.

“You didn’t know?” the man said with a shocked face.

“This is what I meant by ‘mine’.”

“What?” Hermes asked. The man shook his head.

“If the rider is stupid, so is the motorrad. Isn’t it obvious? This land.”

“But, it’s just salt, isn’t it?” Hermes immediately replied.

“This salt can be dug up and sold you know! Didn’t you learn that from your travels?”

Kino spoke to the man in an extremely polite tone.[11]

“We did not know. If it’s fine with you, kindly excuse our insufficient knowledge and enlighten us.”

“Hmph!” the man snorted, and continued, “It can’t be helped. Because of that honest attitude, I’ll tell the whole story especially for you. You see, I was originally a traveler. To be precise, ‘we’ were travelers. A dozen of us were traveling as a group.”

“You were a traveler?” Hermes asked.

“Yes, that’s right. We left out of disgust of our homeland. We traveled with a number of vehicles and horses.”

“And then?”

“And then, without a place to go, without a country to accept us, our days of wandering continued. We were already exhausted. There were disputes, and we lost our money. We even thought of becoming thieves. But at that time, the goddess of fortune gave us an incredible gift.”

“What is it?” Hermes asked.

“You still don’t get it after I said this much? This salt! We struggled and stumbled upon this land,” the man said in astonishment.

“And after that?”

“After that, we quarried the salt from here, and began to sell them in countries to the north and south. It saved us. Anyhow, we received profit simply by transporting and selling something which was originally free. We obtained fuel and food in the countries, and then make a round trip back here. There was no need for us to

immigrate. We can earn a living without having to stay in a country. We continued this way of life ever since."

"I see, I understand up to that part. But what happened to the others?" Hermes asked.

"Those guys? I broke away from them," the man grunted.

"Why?"

"Hmph. That's because I've had enough of their greed."

"Greed?"

"Yeah. For a short time, we worked together. But after that, those rogues divided into groups and began plotting to take the salt all for themselves. In short, they pretended to work hard for us. There was dispute after dispute, and in the end we chose to live apart. We each chose our own territory, and sell to whichever country we like. Hmph. If I stayed with them any longer, I would have become greedy like them. It was right to part with them."

“Then that means your former traveling companions have taken ownership of the salt all over this salt lake, and tries to eliminate all that comes near?” Kino asked.

“The mystery of the attack on travelers solved,” Hermes murmured in an inaudible voice.

“Ah, you’ve met them?” the man asked.

“Yes. They fired at me without warning.”

“Tsk. It’s not surprising for those no-brains to do such a thing. It’s likely they thought that you were my underling or something. They are idiots to the core. Come to think of it, they were like that since birth,” the man said.

“Since birth? How did you know?” Kino asked.

“Ah, those idiots were my sons. Five of them, plus their wives and children. It was my family who went in a journey.”

“……”

“……”

Kino and Hermes fell silent.

“They were really greedy, those bastards. Such rotten character. Unlike me, they did not clearly specified the borders of their territory, did nothing but to haphazardly quarry the salt, and gave no mercy to anyone who comes near. Goodness, I’m glad I did not become like them,” he spat.

—

“That was very helpful. Thank you very much. By the way, I would like to have your permission,” said Kino.

“For what?” The man asked.

“We freely entered your territory without your knowledge. I’m terribly sorry. So, please forgive our rudeness, but we would like to ask for your special permission to allow us to head west from your land starting here. We hope for your kind consideration.”

“… Hmph. If you’ve said that at the very beginning, then I wouldn’t have shouted at you. Okay then. I give you my special permission,” the man said arrogantly.

“Thank you very much. Well then, we’ll be excusing ourselves.”

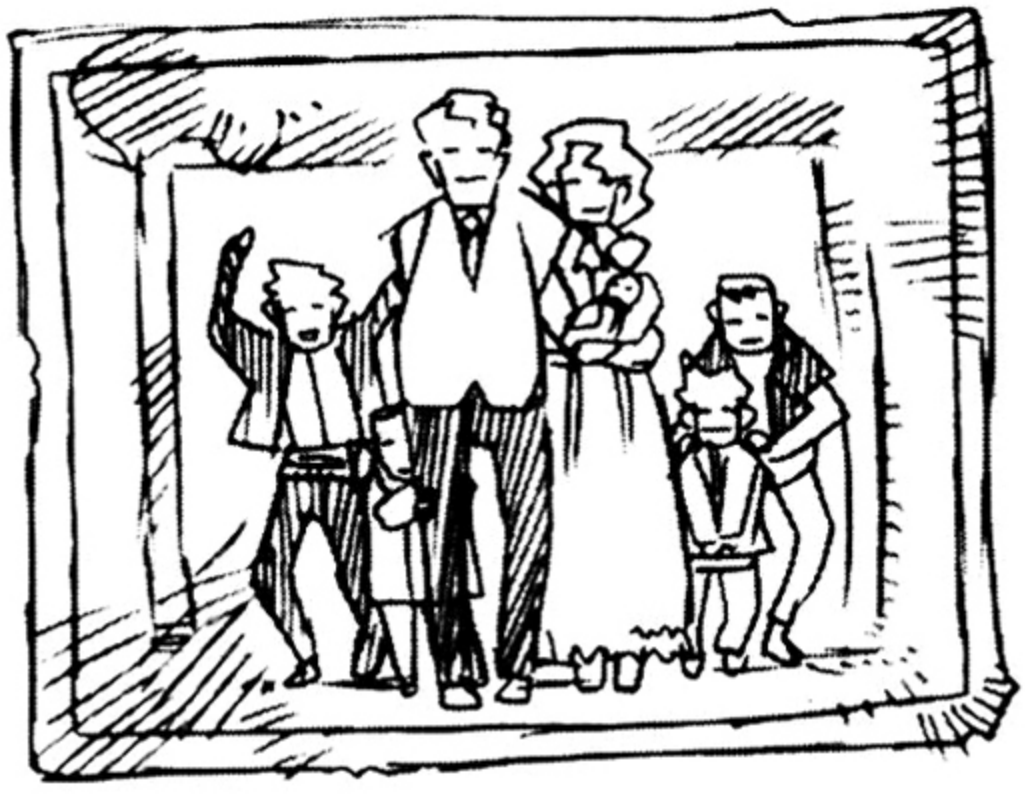
“Bye-bye. Good luck with your work.”

“Hmph. You don’t have to tell me.”

Kino wore her bandana and went astride Hermes. She started the engine and soon rode away.

—

As the motorrad drove away, the man began to hammer the stakes.



“Land of Illness” — For You —[12]

Chapter Ten

"Land of Illness"

— For You —

The scenery in and out of the walls was the same.

It was a rough terrain spanned by brown mountains, without a single blade of grass growing on it. Only the endless stretch of high walls seemed to have sprouted from the ground, both of its sides sporting unchanging scenery.

Underneath the clear, almost transparent sky was a single road. It was a simple road made from hardened earth that was freed from stones. It weaved its way through the valley.

On this road ran a lone motorrad (Note: A two-wheeled vehicle. Only to note that it cannot fly). It rode with the morning sun behind it, its rear wheels raising a brown cloud of dust as it went on.

Instead of a back seat, the motorrad was fitted with a carrier, tied on top of which was a bag and a sleeping bag among other things. Two more black boxes were attached on either side of its rear wheel.

The rider wore a brimmed hat with ear flaps and a worn pair of silver-framed goggles. A bandana for protection against the cold was wrapped around her face.

She wore a brown coat, the excess hem of which was rolled up to her thighs.

"Kino, this is such a dreary place. Both the atmosphere and the scenery," the motorrad said as it ran.

"I guess so. There's nothing here at all," the rider called Kino answered.

"This doesn't look anything like a country's interior…. Have we really entered the country?"

"We have. The inspection booth was unmanned, though."

"I wonder what sort of country this is? Maybe the citizens abandoned civilized living and decided to live in obscurity inside caves? That sounds interesting, if that's the case."

"But you know, Hermes, I heard that this country is so advanced that the people could stay inside buildings their whole lives. And also, that it was a very clean and beautiful country…," Kino said.

"That's definitely a lie," the motorrad called Hermes replied confidently.

“That can’t be. That person said he left the country because it was too clean…. It’s just that I didn’t hear anything about those unmanned walls. I was only told that right in the middle of the wilderness, there should be a tall building and a dome visible along with the walls .

“And where is it?”

“Who knows?”

Kino dropped her speed when approaching a curve, and accelerated when the path went straight. After passing through the side of one mountain, another mountain appeared in its shadow.

“Maybe we’re lost?” Hermes asked out of boredom.

“Nope, that can’t be,” Kino denied.

After arguing back and forth for a while, they both fell silent. They only continued to run indifferently amidst the unchanging scenery.

It was about noon when the walls they were aiming for suddenly came in sight. It was when Kino and Hermes came out from the shadow of a vast mountain.

—

“See, I told you.”

“I see. So it wasn’t a lie after all.”

At the very heart of the wilderness, a tall building and a dome could be seen along with the walls.

From outside, the walls made of old stone looked as if it was coated with something that reflected light. Three enormous buildings stood out well above the walls, surrounded with a group of smaller buildings. The buildings were connected to each other with passages suspended in the air. Below them was a glass dome covering the entire country. The country looked like a huge fort.

At the gates, there were several uniformed officers and soldiers waiting for Kino and Hermes. They greeted Kino and Hermes with a smile.

Kino informed them of her wish to stay inside the country for three days. In response, they gave her a warm welcome, and told her that the country will bear all the expenses during her stay on one condition: that Kino, Hermes, and everything they brought with them will undergo a thorough cleaning. When Kino asked how it will be done,

“You will have to take a shower, Miss Kino. Meanwhile, your clothes will be washed. Also, Mr. Hermes will be sent to the car wash, while all of your belongings, from that big bag to the tiniest needle you have, will be cleaned and disinfected. Of course, you’ll have to list down all of your belongings and we will return them all to you afterwards.”

Kino contemplated for a while before accepting. Hermes voiced out his reluctance, but gave up since there was nothing they could do about it.

A while passed.

After undergoing various procedures, Kino and Hermes finally passed through the walls.

Kino was clad in her black jacket, fastened with a wide belt on the waist. On her right thigh and behind her waist were holsters containing hand persuaders (Note: A persuader is a gun. In this case, a pistol). There was not a speck of dust on her jacket, holsters, and the persuaders inside them.

The coat, which used to be covered in dust, was draped on top of the bag on the carrier, as good as new.

Not only was Hermes washed with water and disinfectant, all of his parts were also polished, and glittered like a mirror.

Kino muttered in front of a huge mirror.

“We have never been this clean before in our lives…”

“Say, what if we don’t leave this place? I don’t want to get dusty every day anymore,” Hermes said as the last door opened.

—

“This is the city. The majority of our population lives here.”

The guide waiting for Kino and Hermes beside the door explained as they entered.

Inside the walls of the so-called city was a clean and orderly space. The well-maintained roads ran through paved city blocks, with buildings lined up along them. Just above the roughly forty-storey buildings was the glass dome covering the entire country.

“With that dome, harmful light rays are intercepted. The window panes of the buildings do the same. The light and air inside the country are all regulated, and the temperature and humidity are adjusted according to the time and place. It’s not cold, isn’t it?”

“That’s true.” Kino opened the collar of her jacket.

“Oh, yes. Please attach this to Mr. Hermes,” the guide said, and showed them two box-shaped objects the size of a dictionary. Kino asked what they were.

“It’s probably a device that can purify exhaust gas. And the other must be a muffler. I thought they would definitely give us something like this,” Hermes answered , and Kino gave an impressed look. The guide skillfully attached the muffler to Hermes. “With this, it will be all right even if you run using your engine. There are even places inside buildings were cars are allowed to run. There are elevators inside the buildings, so please ride those. And also, here’s a map. This is all you need to give back once you leave the city.”

“Understood.”

Kino looked at the small gadget handed to her. A manual and their present location appeared on the screen .

The guide continued. “I believe you’ve seen the walls beyond this place. That was built around ten years ago

after we expanded our territory. The original country came to be called the ‘city’, while the new territory became known as the ‘countryside’[13].”

“A territory? You mean there are people who live in that wasteland?” Hermes asked.

“Yes, there are. However, there’s really very few of them. Several groups of people live in villages scattered all over the place. These people are called ‘pioneers’. They volunteered to live in groups, and work to reclaim the wasteland.”

“Even though they could live inside this place?” Kino asked. The guide gave her a faint smile.

“That’s exactly why. Just as you’ve seen, everyone in our country is guaranteed a clean and comfortable place to live in. But as a result, many people longed for life alongside nature, above genuine soil and under the real sun.”

“I see.”

“The pioneers consist of family units. Among many volunteer families, only a handful who successfully passed health inspections and proficiency exams were

chosen. After training, they set off to build the new country. It’s a real honor. Our special military forces who likewise went through a special screening served as their escort. After the reclamation, the land will be used as farmlands for self-sufficient villages. It will take a long time, but they are planning to make it into something different from the city. It was also an experiment to test whether our people, who have become delicate due to our way of life, could endure life amidst harsh nature.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And that’s why the pioneers are the ‘elite among the elite’ of our country. To tell you the truth, I also dreamed of living in the countryside to help in building the new country. But it’s impossible for normal people like me. I’ll probably faint if I see a wild lizard or a caterpillar; I wouldn’t be able to work at all!”

The guide smiled. “Yes. And I’m sure travelers like you will receive glances of admiration from everyone. You will get meal invitations left and right. You’d better expect them. It’s up to you whether you accept someone’s invitation based on how they look or the kind of food they offer you,” the guide said happily.

“The type *and* the quantity of food. At least for Kino,” Hermes added.

—

Kino rode Hermes after parting with the guide before the gates.

Anywhere you look, the town was free from dirt and cracks.

Before Kino and Hermes arrived at the hotel, they received twelve invitations to dine. They turned them all down at the meantime.

The hotel was a single, high-rise building. They were guided, and rode a glass elevator. They were treated to a breathtaking view of the wilderness while they made their way to the room in the highest floor.

“It’s too roomy…. What do they use it for?” Kino muttered after the hotel boy left.

“It’s perfect. You can do your shooting practice here,” Hermes said.

Kino soon began to take down the luggage from Hermes, when the doorbell rang. A middle-aged man wearing a suit, and a woman who looked like his wife, appeared from a big monitor on the wall.

The man spoke. [Good day, miss traveler. I am this hotel’s owner. I called with my wife because we would like to request something from you. Will you spare us some of your time?]

Kino showed the couple inside. Still confused, Kino offered them a nearby table and chair. The two thanked her and sat down.

After introductions,

“Have you committed yourself to have lunch with someone tomorrow?” the owner asked. Both of them had serious expressions on their faces.

“No,” Kino answered. Upon hearing this, the two entreated her to accept their invitation, saying that they would do anything for her in return.

Kino asked them why they were willing to go to such lengths.

“We have a daughter who has been ill for a long time. We would like you to tell her stories about your travels,” the wife answered.

—

The next morning.

As always, Kino woke up at dawn.

She performed her light exercises, then proceeded with her persuader training. She called the revolver on her right thigh ‘Canon’, and the slim automatic behind her waist, ‘Woodsman’. She practiced quick draw with both, then disassembled and cleaned them. Afterwards, she took a shower in the spacious bathroom.

When the sun has risen, Kino ordered breakfast to be sent to her room. Perhaps due to the owner’s orders, a splendid meal in large quantities came.

After her meal, Kino bitterly saw off what remained of the food.

“Cheapskate. You’ll get to eat lunch after, too!” Hermes, who woke up unnoticed, said from behind.

—

Kino straddled the luggage-free Hermes, and rode through the city.

Hermes was all praises for the roads and the buildings’ structures.

“Hmm. Is that so?” It couldn’t be discerned from Kino’s reply whether she agreed or not.

Even during their sightseeing, they received invitations everywhere. Kino declined on the merit of their previous engagement, and continued.

When it was almost noontime, Kino arrived at the place the owner indicated in the map the previous day. It

was a big, white building built in a place a bit far from the center of the country. The buildings around it were reduced on purpose, to create an unrestricted atmosphere. A signboard told them that it was the ‘First National Hospital’.

The couple welcomed them when they came in. As they thanked her again, Kino removed her hat. Then they were guided to the room where the couple’s daughter ‘ resided’.

—

The room was lined up with wooden furniture that gives off an air of history and refinement. The ambience of the room was like that of an old mansion.

A young girl in her early teens was sitting on a large bed with lace curtains draping from the pillars and the roof.

Her skin was white. Almost everyone in this country had fair skin, but this girl’s skin was even paler, pure

white like that of bleached paper. She had long, blond hair that hung down to the bed, and blue eyes in her thin face.

She wore a thin, pink cardigan on top of pajamas patterned with blue and red tomatoes.

The girl was reading a letter she held with both hands. She read it with narrowed eyes.

When she heard the knock on the door, the girl carefully folded the letter and put it inside an envelope. Then she opened a box on her bedside and placed it inside.

“Please come in.” The door automatically opened in response to the girl’s voice.

—

“I am Kino. This here is my partner, Hermes.”

Kino introduced.

“I’m Inertia. It’s nice to meet you, Miss Kino, Mr. Hermes. I heard about you from my mother. Thank you for coming all the way to my room.”

The girl stood up, lightly picked up the hem of an imaginary dress, and curtsied.

“Thank you for your courtesy,” Kino placed her hand on her chest and bowed. Kino wore her white shirt. Her persuaders and their holsters were tucked neatly in her jacket and tied on Hermes’ carrier.

Kino propped Hermes on his center stand in front of the bed, and seated herself.

“Please don’t hold back. You see, Kino was promised a grand meal and new ammunition, while I will be given high quality oil, plugs, and fuel. It’s give-and-take,” Hermes said.

Inertia laughed. “I was surprised. When I heard about a traveler riding a motorrad, I was… expecting someone who looked wild and older.”

“If what you mean by ‘wild’ is someone rough-mannered, then you got the right person,” Hermes said, and Kino gave a twitchy smile.

Inertia looked at Kino with her azure eyes. “Will you tell me stories about your travels?”

“Sure. I came here for that reason,” Kino said.

—

Lunch was carried into the room, and Kino dined together with Inertia and the couple.

Kino and Hermes told them stories about their travels. Not only Inertia, but even her parents listened with deep interest.

After the meal. The parents left the hospital room regretfully, saying that they had to return to work.

Only Kino, Hermes, and the owner of the room were left.

Kino and Inertia sat with the table between them, and Hermes on the left side. There was a platter of fruits, tea cups and a teapot on the table.

“Thank you very much for sparing some of your time for me. I had so much fun. I’m sure everybody in the country would have wanted to listen to your stories, since it was a long time since a traveler ever came here…, ” Inertia said.

Kino shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. It was just as Hermes said.”

“But other people might have been more generous…,” Inertia said, looking troubled.

“Or not. Right now, we may be saying to ourselves, ‘It would’ve have been better if we accepted that other invitation…’”

“That’s true. Besides, you’re sick for two years now. You wouldn’t be punished for having a little fun, right?”

Kino and Hermes quickly said, and the girl slowly smiled.

“Do you know about my illness?” Inertia asked, still smiling.

Kino answered, “We heard from your father. Since a long time ago, a certain proportion of the population, regardless of age, would get this mysterious illness. A cure or vaccine has yet to be found. But only recently, they developed a drug that could delay the progress of the disease. It seems like it won’t take a long time before they finally find a cure.”

“That’s right. ——Soon, that medicine will be completed, and I will take it. Then, I can finally go home to our house and go to school again.”

“Yup.”

“That’s right.”

“Maybe everyone from my old school still remembers me… or maybe they have forgotten about me already. They might get surprised when they see me. Maybe I can

play with everyone again soon. But I don’t really care about playing. I will study and train hard to be able to go to the countryside someday.

“Oh? You want to go out there?” Hermes asked. Inertia smiled and nodded.

“Your parents don’t know about that, do they?” Kino said. Inertia was slightly surprised.

“Yes. … So you realized it.”

“It’s because you didn’t show that attitude before while we were telling you stories. If anything, it’s your parents who looked as if they’re ready to abandon their jobs to go out there.”

“Ahahaha. That may be true. My father and my mother also longed to live in the countryside after all. But since there’s the hotel, it’s not possible. I couldn’t even imagine what they would say if I told them that I wanted to go.”

“You want to do farm work?” Kino asked.

“There’s that… but more importantly, there’s someone I would like to meet. I wanted to thank that person once we see each other.”

“But… your parents don’t know about that person, right?” Hermes said.

“No…,” Inertia answered with a small voice.

“What kind of person? Eh?” Hermes asked immediately.

“Um… please keep it a secret from my parents, okay? No, please don’t tell anyone!” Inertia boldly declared, shaking her blond head. Her white cheeks were stained red ever so slightly.

“Okay. This will not escape this room.”

“Understood.”

Kino and Hermes agreed. Inertia’s face quickly lit up.

Inertia stood up and headed to the bed. She opened the box on her bedside and took out a book the size of a dictionary. It was a diary. It was carefully bound, and locked with a key.

She opened the diary with the key. There were several letters placed in between the pages.

“I keep in touch with someone in the countryside. These are all the letters I received from that person.”

“A boy? Or a girl?” Hermes asked.

“It’s… a boy,” Inertia answered clearly. And continued , “His name is Logue. He’s the same age as me. Right now, he lives in a pioneer village together with his family .”

“A friend from your school? I heard that only a few were selected as pioneers,” Kino asked. Inertia shook her head.

“We met purely by chance. One year ago, he went to the hospital for the medical examination of the volunteers. I was looking at the countryside from the observation deck, when he suddenly jumped up, pointed

at the countryside, and shouted, ‘I see it! I’ll definitely go there!’”

“Uh-huh.”

“He was not supposed to be in there. And while I looked at him in surprise, the nurses came to take him away…. Then I quickly told them, ‘That person is my friend.’”

“Way to go!” Hermes praised. Inertia returned a coy look.

“He thanked me, and then we gazed at the scenery together for a long time. He told me that living in the countryside was his ultimate dream. He talked about it passionately. Back then we promised each other that he would pass the exams and live there, and that I would do my best to get well from my illness.”

“And then you started writing letters to each other.”

“Yes. So that it wouldn’t be too much trouble for us both, we decided to send only one page each month. In his second letter, he wrote that he and his family were able to pass the assessment, and that they would soon start living in the newly-built village! I was really happy

for him. He told me that if we tried hard enough, our dreams will really come true…,” The girl spoke, her blue eyes sparkling. “Soon after, he moved to the countryside with his family. After a while, a letter came saying, ‘This place was more amazing than I thought. I’ll try my best!’ We continued to exchange letters every month. In his letter three months ago, he told me that the first child has been born in the village. In the one two months ago, he said that he was completely fine even though an insect landed on his food. And in his latest letter, he told me that fifty tomato seedlings have grown in their greenhouse, and that he was having fun helping with the work every day. ——He’s doing his best to make his dreams come true. And so, I have to do my best to fight my illness too. I feel bad for a while after I drink my medicine. But when that happens, I read his letters. They fill me with courage. Humans are weak alone, but I believe that when they encourage each other, they can do anything!” Inertia spoke ecstatically.

“That’s right! Kino, you should go find yourself a boyfriend too!” Hermes teased.

“Mind your own business,” Kino said.

After Inertia and Kino’s laughter subsided,

“When I get better, I will take the qualification exam and permission to go the country. I want to try living in that village and eat tomato grown from real soil. It’s my dream.”

“I hope they complete that medicine soon,”

“Yeah,”

Kino and Hermes said.

“Yes. I’m sure everything will be all right. I believe the future will head to a good direction if we work hard. I’m sure it will be all right. I’m sure of it,” the white-skinned girl said.

—

“Miss Kino, Mr. Hermes, I have one request.”

The winter sun was beginning to set, and the light penetrating the glass dome was automatically regulated.

“When I met you, I thought I could make this request. It’s rather selfish of me, but I thought I had to do it no matter what.” Inertia bit her lip.

“What is it? Since you have treated us this much, I, being a nice guy, would do anything for you. Besides, I’ m a wonderful motorrad so I can help you,” Hermes said .

Kino hit Hermes tank first, before asking Inertia what her request was.

“You will head west to depart the country, right? It seems that the village Logue lives in is a bit south from that road…”

“I see,” Kino said. Inertia looked straight at Kino.

“We can only exchange letters because of the rules. But actually, there was a present I had wanted to give to him before he left for the country”

Inertia took out a small box from inside the box on her bedside. She opened it and took out the object inside.

It was a tiny brooch carved out from something white. It was a little rough, but it can be recognized as a bird

from its form. Short, golden hair was glued on its wings and cockscomb.

“You made this yourself?” Kino asked.

“Yes… I made it as small as possible, but it won’t fit inside the envelope no matter what I do. My request is to send this to Logue. It’s a charm to make the farm do well, and so that he would not get sick or injured. I would like you to give this to the post office where I always send my letters. I know this is selfish of me. But, I don’t think I will ever have a chance like this again. Please…”

Kino gazed at the brooch for a while.

“I have no reason to reject your request.”

“You bet. There would be now way for us to grant your wish if you asked us to deliver a bed or something.”

Kino and Hermes said.

Inertia was almost in tears as she thanked Kino and Hermes. Right then, the nurse came in and looked at Kino and Hermes in surprise.

After giving Inertia her medicine, the nurse asked if Kino and Hermes were to depart the next day.

“Then please have lunch at our house!” she said, almost clinging to Kino.

Kino shook her head. “Too bad, but I’m planning to look around the countryside tomorrow. I would like to observe the village growing tomatoes.”

—

The next day, that is, the morning of the third day since Kino entered the country.

Kino woke up at dawn.

Outside the window was the expanse of the cloudless, light-purple sky, and the wilderness devoid of grass.

The ammunition, portable rations, and all of the things she requested were arranged in the elevator in her room. Her clothes were washed, and a few of them were new. Hermes was given his plugs and fuel, and his oil was replaced the previous night.

As usual, Kino performed her light exercises and her persuader training. Afterwards, she took a long shower and ate her breakfast slowly, as if she was reluctant to part with them.

They checked out of the hotel as soon as the sun has risen. The couple came and couldn’t thank them enough for making Inertia happy.

After leaving the hotel, they rode through the city, which was free from pedestrians.

Upon arriving at the city’s western gates, Kino returned the map and made her preparations to depart. Kino checked her persuaders and wore her coat. She also returned the exhaust purification device, thinking that it wouldn’t last long.

Because it would take them a long time to go back to the city, she made sure that she didn’t leave anything behind. Kino confirmed that the small box was inside her jacket’s pocket.

They headed for the walls and went out. The cold wind was blowing, and the dust danced about.

Kino asked the soldier for directions, and was shown a map of the country. Kino and Hermes looked at it intently for a while, and set off.

—

A lone motorrad was running through the wilderness.

“Do you get it?” Hermes asked, and Kino answered.

“Of course. It’s not indicated in the map, but the geographic features are there. After a distance of sixty, we should see two mountains to our left. After passing through that, we should see the 42nd pioneer village in

the mountain basin. The road was drawn up to that place .”

“Why was the village not drawn in the map?”

“Maybe because it’s still new? We’ll find out once we get there,” Kino said.

“I suppose so,” Hermes said. And then, “I wonder what kind of face Logue would make once he gets Inertia ’s present for him?”

“No idea… We’ll also know that once we get there.”

“I guess so.”

Kino accelerated some more. Kino and Hermes rode with the morning sun behind them.

On their way, they saw an enormous, green circle at the side of the road. It was a field from one of the pioneer villages, with a huge sprinkler making its rounds in it.

Around the time when the sun has ascended higher, and their shadows had grown shorter,

“Over here.”

Kino stopped Hermes. There was a road climbing towards the two mountains to their left.

“It’s not such a nice road. It seems like my frame would get scratched with the flying stones.”

“Why are you complaining after we’ve come so far?”

Kino let the rear wheel slide ostentatiously, and turned Hermes to the left.

After climbing the mountain in one go,

“You’re a nice person aren’t you, Kino?”

“It’s just gratitude for the stuff they gave us.”

“Really?”

They rode through the flat summit for a while.

When the road has become a downward slope, a view opened before them.

“It must be that.”

“No doubt.”

In one corner of the wide basin were several buildings. Around it, the cultivated fields were spread in a checkered pattern. There was a plastic greenhouse reflecting the light.

—

“Strange…” Kino muttered.

Kino was in front of a building, looking at its door.

Hermes asked from the road. “There’s no one here after all?”

“There’s nobody. But it’s locked. With chains, too.”

They realized from afar that there was nobody in the fields, and even after approaching the village, no one came out. A cold wind blew through the road.

“It doesn’t look like the interior of the buildings were destroyed. It seems like their crops were also neatly harvested…,” Kino said.

“Maybe the villagers all moved to some other place? Perhaps this place was no good.”

“It would be troublesome if that’s the case…. We have to look for the new address to hand it over——”

“Kino, there’s a car,” Hermes called out to Kino. Kino returned to the road, and saw headlights approaching from the other side of the basin.

The car proceeded straight towards Kino and Hermes’ direction. It was a small four-wheel drive painted with the same color as the ground. There was only one person aboard it.

“Perfect. Let’s go ask.”

Kino waved to the car. The car stopped and the man inside it came out.

The man looked around his early twenties. He wore sunglasses that reflected Kino and Hermes, and was clad in the same green winter uniform that the soldiers outside the city gates wore. There was a persuader

holster attached on the left side of his waist belt, and a dagger was positioned behind him so that it could be pulled out with an underhand from the right.

“What are you doing in a place like this? Ah… could it be that you were the travelers who arrived the day before yesterday?” the man asked.

“That’s right. I’m Kino. This here is Hermes.”

“Hello.”

“Good day. Welcome to our country. I am Lieutenant Cole of the 3rd Special Security Squad,” the young officer joined his heels together and saluted.

“But why are you here? If you wish to depart from the new western gate, you must have lost your way. It’s not like you can’t go through this road, but it will take you two days. Do you want me to guide you to the main road ?”

“Aren’t there people living in this village?” Kino asked .

“This place is not available yet. It was made for experimental purposes, built as a temporary training center for the pioneers,” Lieutenant Cole answered.

“That’s weird. We came here to give something to a person who lived here in the past year,” Hermes said. The corner of Lieutenant Cole’s lips tensed a little.

He asked, “What’s the address?”

Kino replied, “‘C.O. Post Office 42nd Pioneer Village’, for——”

“A boy named Logue, right?” Lieutenant Cole said. He took off his sunglasses, and revealed eyes as blue as Inertia’s.

—

In a place a little ways off the village, there was a

building built on the highest place in the area. It was a concrete two-storey building with no decoration whatsoever, and with a big antenna on its roof.

The four-wheel drive silently stopped in front of the building, immediately followed by the roar of Hermes’ engine.

Lieutenant Cole opened the entrance with a key, and invited Kino and Hermes inside.

The dim office-like room was furnished with a small desk and chairs, and lined up with empty document shelves. Lieutenant Cole offered Kino a seat, hung his cap on the wall, and turned to open the firmly shut sliding doors. Light entered, illuminating its clean interior.

Kino propped Hermes on his center stand beside her own chair. Then she hung her coat and cap on top of him .

Lieutenant Cole sat opposite Kino. He placed his elbows on the desk and joined his hands on his forehead. He closed his eyes and took a long, quiet breath. Then he lifted his face, and spoke in a lifeless voice.

“Welcome to the ‘post office’.”

—

Kino took out a small box from her jacket’s pocket. She opened it and presented the object inside on her palm.

It was a tiny brooch carved out from something white. It was a little rough, but it can be recognized as a bird from its form. Short, golden hair was glued on its wings and cockscomb.

“It’s apparently a charm. From Inertia to Logue.”

Kino placed the box on the table. Lieutenant Cole did not touch it, and only looked at it.

“Are you assigned to the post office?” Kino asked.

“Yes. In the countryside, some soldiers work for the post office. I worked here before. No… I’m still working here even now.”

“Then Kino’s job ends here since she has already delivered it. Shall we go now?” Hermes said bluntly and with a hint of sarcasm. Lieutenant Cole closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Ah… what in the world…,” he muttered weakly.

“Will you hand this to the boy?” Kino asked.

Lieutenant Cole shook his head and spoke with a clear voice. “The possibility of that happening is zero. It can’t be done.”

“Why?” Hermes asked.

Lieutenant Cole answered.

“Because he has died a long time ago. Half a year ago. To be exact, he was killed half a year and four days ago.”

—

“I take it that you know about the disease, and the ongoing development of a cure for it?”

“Yes.”

“Yup.”

“And I believe you’ve heard about the pioneers?”

“Yes.”

“Yup.”

“But, you don’t know about the ‘special pioneers’, do you?”

“We don’t.”

“What’s that again?”

“To put it simply… they are people gathered together to be killed.”

“……. Please continue.”

“Of course… I’ll tell you everything that I know. It’s not enough to call it an epidemic in the city… it’s an illness that has made a lot of people suffer——. Our country had been working to fight this illness. It has become a national concern. We had been in a painful struggle against this most wicked of enemies. We wanted to find a cure as soon as possible. We have suffered for countless years, and so we want to make sure that no one will die from this disease anymore.”

“Okay.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then, three years ago… we realized the limits of animal testing. Many doctors began to insist on the necessity of experiments on living humans. They advocated the belief that development of the cure would be hastened if live human subjects were to be used. Eventually, this view became accepted.”

“……”

“And then?”

“There are different kinds of people who yearned to become pioneers. But in practice, being chosen has little to do with passing the exams. Instead, we only choose among families who belonged to the poorest sectors, and who don’t have any other relatives. And from them, we created a group of pioneers.”

“And they are the ‘special pioneers’?”

“Yes. They came, full of hopes and happiness in their hearts, and started to live in the villages. The security escorts were there to guard them and make sure that no one would escape…. But you see…! It wasn’t decided yet that they will be used for experiments. Maybe the cure would be completed before they get ‘used’. If so, then they will truly be a group of pioneers, and live in that village in peace…”

“I see.”

“But that didn’t happen.”

“Half a year ago, it was finally decided that all of the villagers will become test subjects. And it was carried out … by us. One night, we attacked them with sleeping gas and carried them away. We locked them up inside a

truck… I’ve only seen up to that point. I only heard that lively boy who looked up to me like an older brother calling after me, and that was it. They were transported to the basement of an establishment inside the city, and were ‘used’ in various kinds of experiments. I don’t know the details. I don’t even want to know. I only heard from my superior officer that half a year and four days ago, the boy was… dissected alive, turned into a specimen, and transferred to a tiny glass bottle. Soon after, I heard that they completed a medicine that can slow down the advance of the disease. Since then, that village had been preserved.”

“I understand. But I have one more question.”

“The letters.”

“Yes. I continued to write them. I am tasked with the inspection of letters, perhaps to make sure that there’s nothing suspicious about them. Even so, for a letter from the city to arrive here… needs an approval of an ‘elite’. There are only a few letters that come, since receiving them will gain you hatred rather than admiration. Moreover, being ‘special pioneers’, it’s unlikely for them to receive any. Very unlikely.”

“But…”

“I see.”

“… But letters came from that girl every month without fail. And he wrote back each time. There’s a machine that lets me read what’s inside those letters without having to open them. He encouraged the girl who could not go out due to her illness, and she encouraged the boy to do his best out in the countryside. Her only dream was to completely recover and live in the countryside together with that boy.”

—

Lieutenant Cole suddenly tore at his hair with hands. And then he howled,

“Just one letter! Just one letter half a year ago! If only I had written her ‘I won’t be able to send you letters because I’m busy.’ No! I should have crumpled her

letters as soon as they came! That’s what I should have done! But why?! Why did I have to write her replies?! There’s something wrong with me! To do such a thing!”

“But you couldn’t stop yourself from doing it, eh?” Hermes asked without any change in his tone.

Lieutenant Cole pressed on his head with his hands.

“Month after month… I feared that I would get exposed. Each time I opened the envelope, I was scared that the words ‘Who are you?’ would be written there. Even so… Even so…”

Then he lifted his face. With eyes that seemed as if they were about to shed tears, the soldier looked at the tiny bird before him.

“Then that is for you. Please accept it,” Kino said gently.

“I understand…,” he replied with a soft voice, and muttered. “Then I guess I’ll have to write a reply.”

Lieutenant Cole lifted the bird with his hands. He silently closed the box, stood up, and stowed it inside the shelf behind him.

“Hey,” Hermes asked as Lieutenant Cole returned to his seat. “Will you be observing and preserving the village again?”

Lieutenant Cole nodded. “Yes, we’ll do that again. There are plans to send in the next batch of test subjects. Again, we will escort and guard the villagers, and I will be in charge of post office work.” Then he narrowed his eyes and spoke gently. “It’s for the sake of the country. For the sake of many people. And above all… it’s for her future.”

“I understand. Thank you for the story. We’ll be on our way.”

Lieutenant Cole scrutinized the traveler in front of him . “Miss Kino, thank you very much, and… I’m sorry.”

He kicked off the table. Kino received a direct hit on her upper body and collapsed backwards. When she managed to get rid of the desk above her chest, Lieutenant Cole stepped on the holster containing Canon with his right foot.

The blue-eyed soldier silently looked at the opponent he resolved to kill. He pulled out the dagger with an

unwavering movement honed from practice, and lunged forward, supporting it with his left hand.

Kino slipped her right hand in her jacket’s left cuff, and grasped the knife in there.

—

The scenery in and out of the walls was the same.

It was a rough terrain spanned by brown mountains, without a single blade of grass growing on it. Only the endless stretch of high walls seemed to have sprouted from the ground, both of its sides sporting unchanging scenery.

Underneath the clear, almost transparent sky was a single road. It was a simple road made from hardened earth that was freed from stones. It weaved its way through the valley.

Kino and Hermes rode west on the road, raising up dry dust behind them.

Kino’s head and the brim of her hat were slightly lowered, preventing the winter sun from getting in the way of her vision.

“Kino, that’s rare,” Hermes said.

“Hm? …Yeah. Just for the time being, since we’re still inside the country,” Kino answered.

—

Ten days after the traveler left.

A nurse approached the white-skinned, golden-headed, blue-eyed girl seated on her bed. She was carrying medicine, as well as a letter.

The nurse reminded her to drink the medicine first, then she went out of the room and left the girl alone.

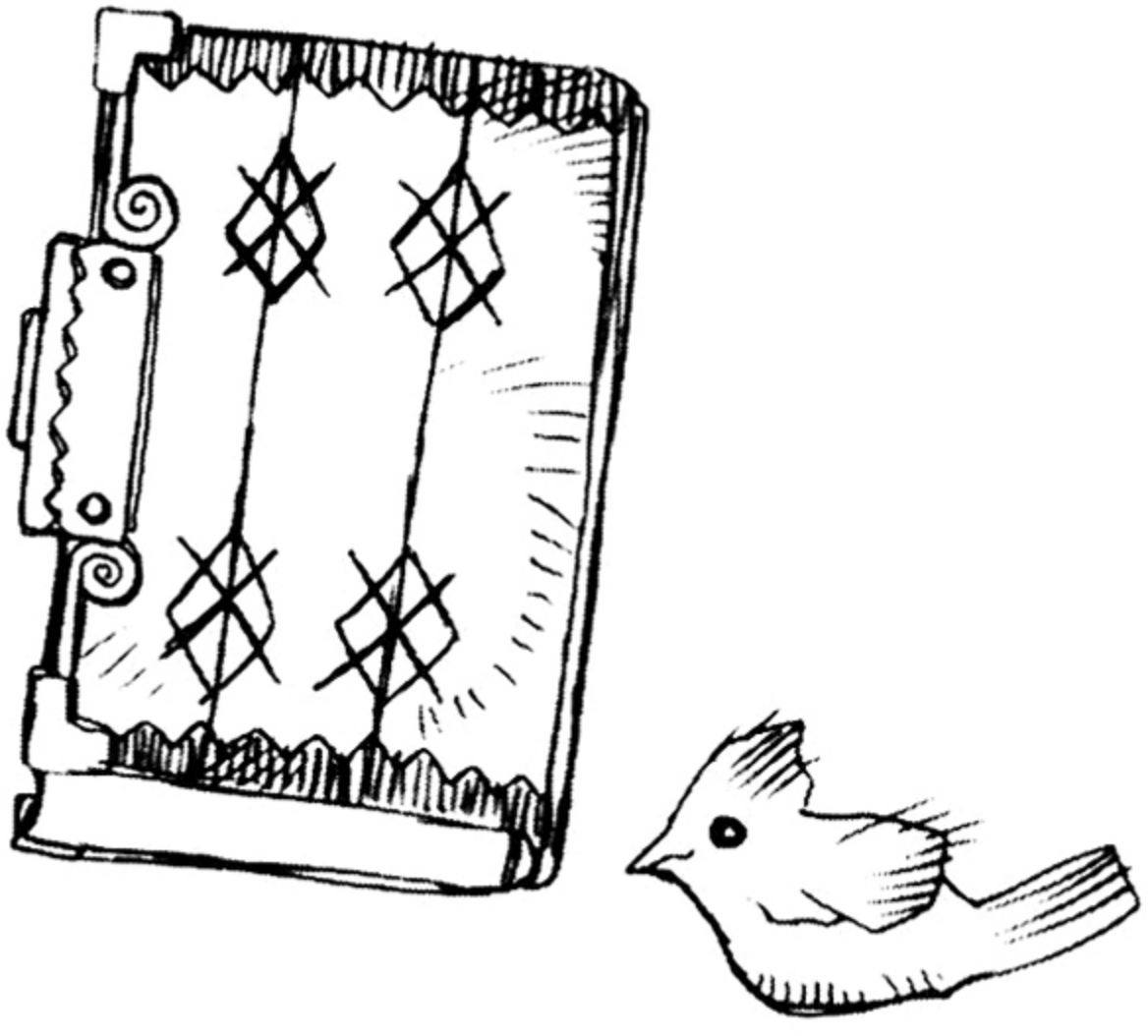
As she was told, the girl first drank her medicine.

With a paper knife, the girl carefully opened the letter that was imprinted only with the hospital’s name and the room number.

Inside was a checker-patterned envelope stamped with the words, ‘Sterilized & Inspected’ in big print. The girl held back her eagerness, and cut the seal carefully. A sheet of folded paper emerged from it.

The blue eyes ran through the words written with a simple handwriting: ‘Thank you so much for the gift. When you get well, please come to village. Then let’s have a long talk.’

Then the girl smiled, and on the verge of tears, held the letter closely to her heart.



“Amidst the Setting Sun · a” — Will · a —

The sun was about to set.

The perfectly circular mass of light in the western horizon will be hidden in a little while. On its upper right , tiny, red, jewel-like grains were shining.

As the clear, cloudless sky changed color from orange to blue and then to purple, the whole sky was wrapped in color.

The ground’s gently undulating surface was like a calm sea, carpeted by the early summer grass. Here and there were clumps of trees, as well as a few ponds reflecting the light.

Occasionally, a fair wind would blow, making the foliage quiver.

—

There was a mound bigger than a hill, but not tall

enough to be called a mountain. There was nothing else taller, and capable of obstructing the view to the west, other than this.

The surrounding trees were cleared around its top, and there was a watchtower made of thick logs.

At the bottom of the tower was a big, residential log cabin.

And at the top of the tower was a small lookout for surveillance purposes.

The lookout was bathed with the sunset, quietly shining in a golden color.

There were two male guards in the lookout. The two were gazing at the setting sun with narrowed eyes.

They were gazing at the western sky and the western lands.

“I wonder if the traveler who came by this morning has already stopped her motorrad and is camping out somewhere?” one person asked.

“Yeah, I guess so,” the other person answered.

“Anyway——” one person said.

“What?” the other person asked.

“I’m sick of this annoying scenery,” one person said

“Yeah,” the other person nodded.

“The sky changes color like crazy. The cries of birds in the morning and the insects at night are so irritating. The lights of fireflies flying around are so gloomy. The rainbows after the rains are so creepy.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s totally depressing. I want to go home to our country soon. I want to relax in the basement while watching a video.”

“Yeah.”

“As sentinels, we have to stay in this watchtower built in this kind of place, regardless of how we feel, and regardless of its negative effects on the efficiency of our missions or in our initiative. I’m sure they didn’t use their brains the size of a grain of salt.”

“Yeah.”

—

The sun has set.

The perfectly circular mass of light in the western horizon has disappeared. The tiny, red, jewel-like grains were left isolated and shone more brightly than before.

In the clear, cloudless sky, the orange has begun to sink, the blue slowly intensified, and the purple color has spread.

The ground’s gently undulating surface was like a calm sea, carpeted by the early summer grass. Here and there were clumps of trees, and ponds where the modest light gradually vanishes.

Occasionally, a fair wind would blow, making the foliage quiver.

The sound of rustling leaves surrounded the two men.

“Really, what an annoying place,” one person said. And then, he headed to a ladder to climb down the lookout.

“At last today’s watch is over…. I’ll go ahead, Will.”

While listening to the sound of the other climbing down the ladder,

“Yeah…” the other person muttered.

And then fell into thought.

Otogaso — Preface —[14]

On a certain day and month in the year 2001. A phone rang in Keiichi Sigsawa's apartment.

Sigsawa: (picks up the phone) "Hello, who's this?"

Mysterious man: (in a man's voice) "Good afternoon. Is this the Sigsawa residence?"

Sigsawa: "I don't deny that, but who might you be?"

Self-proclaimed Kino: "Oh, sorry for not introducing myself. I am Kino."

Sigsawa: "… Huh? I don't get what you mean."

Self-proclaimed Kino: "I said I am Kino, the protagonist in your novel. Nice to meet you."

Sigsawa: "…… Sorry but I am going to hang up now. As in, right now."

Self-proclaimed Kino: "Don't do that. After I went out of my way to call you? How rude."

Sigsawa: “Well, no offense… but, you sound too old to be Kino.”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Ah. Indeed, I am already fifty-four years old. I teach economics at some university in Tokyo. I am quite popular with the female students, you know. I even receive a lot of chocolates every Valentine’s Day.”

Sigsawa: “No one asked you for that. How did you get my number anyway?”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “I could still find out even if no one told me, I am Kino after all.”

Sigsawa: “…… If you are Kino, then where is Hermes right now?”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “I ran into Shizu, and Hermes was having a duel with his dog.”

Sigsawa: “… A duel with Riku? How?”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Reaching no conclusion after throwing insults at each other for three days and three nights, they said they are going to settle it with a 50 meter back stroke. Hermes has left for the sea with a pair

of diving goggles, but he hasn't returned yet. Maybe he has been swept out to open sea?"

Sigsawa: "…… What about Shizu?"

Self-proclaimed Kino: "Some guys on an internet forum said that Shizu is my pedophilic stalker. That man went to get an explanation out of them. He said it will take some time because there are a number of them."

Sigsawa: "…… What about Master?"

Self-proclaimed Kino: "She's been charged under the Firearms Act and is in police custody at Shibuya station. She'll probably escape soon and start a gunfight. The police can't handle her alone, so they may have to mobilize the armed forces."

Sigsawa: "…… The Kino in my works doesn't talk like that."

Self-proclaimed Kino: "Hmph—— you've lost."

Sigsawa: "What do you mean by that?"

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Never mind. Anyway, I see ‘A Safe Country’[15] was rejected again. Will it ever see the light of day?”

Sigsawa: “W-wait! How did you know that? Only me, my editor and that spider that I talk to in my room know! ”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “Because I am Kino.”

Sigsawa: “……”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “There are lots of other things that I know. For instance, ‘The Land of Couples’[16] was edited from a rejected short story for volume two. The version of ‘Colosseum’[17] you submitted for the Dengeki Game Novel Prize[18] has a scene where I was wounded and lying half-naked for treatment, not to mention sewing up my jacket. ‘Kino’ was a name you came up with for the male protagonist of another story, but gave it to me in a hurry since you ended up not using that one.

Sigsawa: “Wow!”

Self-proclaimed Kino: “’Wow’?”

Sigsawa: “So it’s true! … Amazing! I never thought Kino really did exist! You are Kino, right?”

Kino: “That’s what I’m telling you from the very beginning…. Just because you are an author, that doesn’t mean you have to be suspicious of anything and everything all the time.”

Sigsawa: “S-sorry. I’ll reconsider my skepticism.”

Kino: “I have to go now.”

Sigsawa: “No way! Don’t go yet! Please! Let’s talk some more! Ah yes, which country is the most memorable for you? Please tell me so I can write it down! ”

Kino: “Sadly… my three days are up.”

Sigsawa: “… Please, five more minutes!”

Kino: “Come on, Hermes. Let’s go. Goodbye.” (loud engine noise)

Sigsawa: “No wait!”

Kino: “Hermes, is that seaweed?” (voice getting distant)

Sigsawa: “Ah… Wait… Please don’t leave…” (tearful voice)

Beep beep beep

Keiichi Sigsawa
January 2002

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ Original title is *"Ano Toki no Koto"*, or literally, " About That Time".
2. ↑ Written as 'レ', more literally, 'Regel'.
3. ↑ Included in the first Kino no Tabi PS2 visual novel .
4. ↑ ウ (The Melancholy of Ulericks) (*Urerikkusu no yuutsu*) is the third book in the light novel series, " Meg and Seron" by Keiichi Sigsawa, the same author as Kino's Journey.
5. ↑ Pardon me if I'm wrong, but if my translation is correct, then this means that in this world, other bikes/motorcycles can fly using something called a ' lifter'. And so the frequent reminder of the author that Hermes is a two-wheeled vehicle, meaning he can't fly, makes sense.
6. ↑ As always Hermes tries to display his erudition by using a suitable proverb, but fails miserably. There's a saying 「, which means "If you're prepared, you don't need to worry." It is pronounced as *"sonae areba urei nashi"*, but Hermes says *"sonae areba ukulele nashi"*, making it sound really weird.
7. ↑ This story happened before Volume5 Chapter4: " Land of Heroes" —No Hero—

8. ↑ Story adapted and slightly modified in anime episode 3.
9. ↑ Forced an idiom to rhyme with what Hermes said . The phrase was originally, *'issunsaki wa yami'*, literally, 'the immediate future is dark', which matches with the English expression, 'No one knows what the future holds.'
10. ↑ If this was confusing to you, you're not alone. Here I thought the little girl was shot. I had to reread the previous paragraphs to realize that it was probably one of the slaves being thrown into the hole…
11. ↑ From this point onwards, Kino speaks to the man in a very polite manner (a mix of humble and polite forms of Japanese). In contrast, the man was conversing in a very rude manner from start to end, using words like *kisama* and *omaera*, which are very rude ways of saying 'you'.
12. ↑ Made into the second Kino no Tabi film back in 2007. It is also part of the first PS2 visual novel.
13. ↑ The original term, *kanto-ri* or 'country' was changed to 'countryside' to avoid confusion with *kuni*, which is also translated as 'country' or 'land'.
14. ↑ The Japanese title was kept because I can't find a suitable translation for it. Sorry…

15. ↑ Volume 6 Chapter 6: “A Safe Country” — For His Safety —
16. ↑ Volume 4 Chapter 3: “Land of Couples” — Even a Dog Doesn’t Eat—
17. ↑ Volume 1 Chapter 4: “Colosseum” — Avengers —
18. ↑ Kino no Tabi was originally submitted as an entry for this contest in 2000. It was a finalist, but it did not win. However, soon after, it was serialized in Dengeki hp.